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The Confessions of  
A Browning Lover

JOHN WALKER POWELL

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# The Confessions of A Browning Lover

BY  
JOHN WALKER POWELL



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**TO "H. G."**



## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
PREFACE.....	9
I. OF THE POET AS ARTIST.....	15
II. OF ARTISTS AND PHILOSOPHERS.....	49
III. OF IDEAS AND FORMS.....	76
IV. OF ORTHODOXY AND THE THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE.....	100
V. OF STRUCTURAL <i>vs.</i> ORNAMENTAL TRUTH.	132
VI. OF LIFE AND LOVE.....	157
VII. OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL.....	185
VIII. PROSPICE.....	213



## PREFACE

As I look over these pages, now that they are finished, I wonder if I have accomplished the purpose with which I began. I seem to have been "ever a fighter." The controversial note runs through much of what I have written. Well, there seem to be plenty of windmills in our modern life at which to tilt, and a Browning lover ought not to be averse to breaking a lance now and then. If sometimes I have fought with shadows, or doughtily overthrown a man of straw, it may be I have discovered to the world some lurking enemy whose presence was unsuspected, or that I have shown the unknowing where they may arm themselves when the hour comes to fight.

I have not much concerned me with many matters of usual interest to commentators. I have not attempted to discover the meaning of puzzling passages, nor to elucidate obscure references, preferring to leave these things to the learned librarian's assistants who delight in them. I have come upon many amusing discoveries in my reading. Solemn notes in the appendix of well-known editions attribute the most impossible meanings to the poet, or mistake the most obvious references. Misquotations abound in the writings of those who are esteemed authorities. Sometimes the slightest tincture of Browning seems to

## PREFACE

have power to color whole seas of sentimental vaporings on the part of popular lecturers. None of these things move me. I may have sinned in my own way, but neither an annotator nor a commentator will I be.

It may be that I have laid myself open to the charge of rambling into fields remote from the path I set out to follow; of venturing to express opinions on matters of literary or artistic criticism too high for me. But I have ranged no more widely than Browning himself, whose interests veered from art and music to metaphysics, Greek tragedies, and mediæval history. If I have spoken as an *amateur* and not as the scribes, allowance may be made for the liberty of the confessional. I shall be content, not if the reader agrees with what I may have said of art or philosophy, but if I have roused him to thought.

Another point at which I venture to anticipate the critics is in the matter of my attitude toward modernism, both in literature and in science. As to what I have said of the chief writers of our day I have no apology to make. That they are great artists I have cheerfully admitted. That they have no comprehensive philosophy of life, no sufficient answer to its deepest questions, it seems to me they would themselves as freely grant. The interpretation of Christianity embodied in the traditions of the church has been definitely set aside by all the principal votaries of literature, who base their thinking on the science of the

## PREFACE

latter half of the nineteenth century. They offer nothing whatever to take its place.

That this is a weakness in their art, and that the world must in the end come back to the essential truths which the church has been trying to teach, however profoundly our interpretation of these truths may be modified by the enlargement of thought which the new science has afforded, is the fundamental thesis of this book. I am a Browning lover because Browning did teach these essential truths, and taught them in a form which divorced them from the specific dogmas of the schools and made them acceptable to one who has sat at the feet of present-day science and philosophy.

I would be the last to belittle the contribution of science to modern life. What I have to say regarding the shallowness of much scientific teaching, and its tendency to deny the ideal ends of the spiritual life, has nothing whatever to do with the rights of science in its own field of empirical research, nor with the value of its results as material for further interpretation. Nor would I deny that there are many great scientists whose spiritual vision has been sound, and who have made important contributions to our knowledge of life and its meaning.

But it cannot be denied, first, that the scientific method tends to discount the ideal significance of the facts with which it deals, and to fasten attention upon the material universe to the exclu-



## PREFACE

sion of the world of spiritual values; and, second, that there is a marked tendency on the part of many who are without a peer in their own particular department of scientific knowledge to speak as those having authority upon matters of philosophy and religion in which they are veriest tyros.

When the empirical scientist whose devotion to his own special field has absorbed his thought for a lifetime, and the character of whose work has in itself unfitted him for abstract thinking, and who, moreover, knows nothing whatever of the history of the ideas with which he deals or the unnumbered times his pet fallacies have been exploded, ventures into the field of metaphysics or theology, the result does not always tend to edification.

Still less is such a man capable of expressing an opinion on matters of religious feeling and sentiment, wherein his experience has tended to dwarf his imagination and warp his judgment. Darwin, as is well known, confessed that his devotion to scientific study had destroyed his capacity for the enjoyment of poetry and music. He had the good sense, however, not to venture an opinion in these departments wherein by his own confession it had been worthless. Not all scientists have exhibited that great man's modesty and good judgment. Yet the world listens eagerly for the theological opinions of great inventors or successful captains of industry—on whose religious capacity I would not be understood to stand in judgment, but whose notions regarding spiritual truth are not to

## PREFACE

be compared in significance with those of some humble saint who knows nothing but the Bible and the Catechism.

As I have said in discussing this matter, the scientific world itself has in the main moved a good way beyond the skeptical attitude of Tyn-dall and Huxley and their contemporaries. But the world of magazine science, as well as the world of polite literature, has not yet found it out, and it will doubtless take another generation before our novelists and reviewers can be expected to display an open mind toward the spiritual problems which the common man finds paramount in his experience. The younger generation of poets, of whom Alfred Noyes and John Masefield are representatives, display a much simpler and franker acceptance of spiritual truth, and the sky seems to be reddening to the dawn of a new and brighter day.

That a world in which the vast accumulations of scientific knowledge shall become the foundation for a thoroughgoing spiritual interpretation of human experience will be a much bigger and richer world than that in which Browning moved, I steadfastly believe and joyfully profess. But to me, at least, the poet himself has been the prophet of that new day.

When this book was begun the war in Europe was still in its early stages. Now in its third year it is still too early even to guess what its ultimate effect on the spiritual life of the world

## PREFACE

may be. Assuredly, however, the unmeasured suffering of the flesh and anguish of spirit through which humanity has passed during these thirty months must issue in a deepened sense of spiritual need and a new reliance upon the profoundly simple truths of a spiritual faith.

The age in which we live seems typified in Paracelsus—headstrong in its eagerness for knowledge, yet blind to the supreme significance of love as the power which alone can take up that knowledge and cause it to minister to the well-being of the poor, foolish, broken human life of the world. But Browning it was who taught the present world to sing with Paracelsus,

“I go to prove my soul!  
I see my way as birds their trackless way.  
I shall arrive! what time, what circuit first,  
I ask not: but unless God send his hail  
Or blinding fireballs, sleet, or stifling snow,  
In some time, his good time, I shall arrive:  
He guides me and the bird. In his good time!”

Like Paracelsus, I too commit myself to the sea of circumstance for better or worse:

“Are there not, Festus, are there not, dear Michal,  
Two points in the adventure of the diver,  
One—when, a beggar, he prepares to plunge,  
One—when, a prince, he rises with his pearl?  
Festus, I plunge!”

MARCH 15, 1917.

## CHAPTER I

### OF THE POET AS ARTIST

WHEN Saint Luke wrote the Gospel which bears his name, he made the number of similar writings already in existence a reason for writing another. A like apology may be desirable for adding to the already interminable literature on Browning. The Browning Centennial has come and gone, bringing in its train the inevitable quota of essays and reviews. The Papers of the Browning Society have been before the world for many years. Women's Clubs have discussed the deep and hidden meanings of the poet's most obvious commonplaces, and essayists and lecturers without number have added their critical judgment to the mass of comment upon his work. Can it be possible that anything has been left unsaid, that any new light can be thrown on the poet's message or his place in the pantheon of English bards?

At the same time the very number of existing books and essays upon Browning is so confusing, so discouraging to the most excellent but bewildered Theophilus, that if one new attempt might be made, like the poet's own Cleon, to "prove absurd all written hitherto. . . ." Or if a new voice might attract the attention of some one halting perplexed which treatise to select, which

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

essay to endue; a voice uttering perhaps nothing particularly new, but at least leaving out much of the old that darkened counsel; if one who is neither by training nor temper a literary critic; a mere representative of that ultimate public to which the artist appeals; a seeker after truth, an earnest believer in the Kingdom of the Spirit, holding everything grist that comes to his mill, and claiming the right to find instruction and inspiration wherever he may—if such an one should reveal the processes whereby he has attained to some measure of insight, his experience may doubtless afford little new light for the initiated, but it may prove of value for some wayfaring man like himself. It may be worth while for one more witness to attest the unfailing stimulus, the deep spiritual satisfaction which he finds in Browning above all other English poets.

This essay does not attempt anything so ambitious as a discussion of Browning's "philosophy." It is only what its title imports: the confessions of a Browning lover. It is inevitable, however, that some comparisons and contrasts should be involved with the main currents of present-day thought.

Tennyson declared that poetry means, not what the author may have had in mind, but what it suggests to the reader. If I can make clear, therefore, what Browning's poetry means to me, I claim the right to find such inspiration therein, without any desire to impose my feeling on anyone

## OF THE POET AS ARTIST

else. I simply would fain share my discoveries with my neighbors. The personal character of this paper may perhaps also justify a somewhat freer use of the personal pronoun than would be allowable in a critical essay.

### I

Like most citizens, I listened to a good many lectures on Browning, and read with more or less interest various interpretations of his teaching, before I mustered courage to tackle the poet himself. I knew all the stock comments on his "obscurity." I was familiar with the witty jests upon "Sordello." I felt, as have doubtless many others, that there is enough intelligible poetry in the world to justify one in refusing to be bothered with the work of a man who did not think it worth while to express himself clearly. As the range of my reading increased, however, I kept coming upon traces of Browning's influence. This theologian, that teacher of philosophy, this preacher, and that essayist would hint at the spiritual riches which reward the patient explorer. Suggestive allusions, tantalizing quotations stimulated my curiosity. I discovered that many men whose intellectual and spiritual power I had come to respect held Browning in reverence. So I took my courage in both hands and ordered from my bookseller the fat and forbidding volume of the Cambridge Edition.

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

I suppose up to that time I had read "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix," and "The Pied Piper," and "You Know We French Stormed Ratisbon," but that was about the extent of my acquaintance with the poet. By some chance almost the first poem I attempted to read was "Saul."

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
When a new planet swims into his ken.

The vigor and freshness of the verse, the wealth of imagery, the glowing enthusiasm, rising at times to rapture, swept me off my feet. The spiritual insight and fervor which mark the climax of the poem, the unanswerable appeal of the argument, the thrilling power of its statement of the central spiritual teaching of Christianity, affected me like nothing else I had ever read. I was filled with enthusiasm for the poet as a teacher of religion. I myself was trying to make spiritual truth intelligible to my generation, to enforce it on the hearts and consciences of the world about me. Every incident, every illustration, every line which opened new depths to my own understanding, or which stated the principles of the spiritual life in a fresh and vigorous way which I might employ to enforce my own teaching, was so much pure gold, and I had found an inexhaustible mine. It was not long before smiles would pass over my congregation when I mentioned the poet's name. Enthusiastic members

## OF THE POET AS ARTIST

of women's clubs would absent-mindedly address me as Mr. Browning. I found myself invited to give talks at afternoon teas, to read papers at ministerial meetings, until at length I blossomed into a full-fledged club lecturer upon Browning.

In all this, like the poet himself, I was no Browningite. I found incredibly weary, arid stretches. My somewhat narrow religious prejudices were often shocked. I could not understand why a serious-minded religious philosopher should treat many of the subjects which were to be found in his poems, or look with so large a tolerance upon the frailties and sins of mankind. But these were only the spots on the sun; warmth and light unfailing were there, and my heart expanded under the beneficent rays.

For a number of years I had given courses of lectures before a certain woman's club, and it seemed desirable to announce a final brief series which should sum up in a completer and more systematic way the net results of my study of the poet. To add a measure of popular interest—and widen the sale of tickets—the services of a well-known reader were secured, who should lighten the course by an evening of interpretive readings. I came to listen on the appointed evening, secure in the smug assurance of my special knowledge of Browning, and quite convinced that the reader would do well to confer with me before she began. This being naturally out of the question, I sat in the audience and listened to an artist interpreting



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

the work of another artist—and all at once I had a new Browning! Lines I had passed over a thousand times because they could not be made to bear any theological significance began to live and glow in my feeling. Poems that had seemed mere *jeux d'esprit*, thrown off by the poet in a moment of fine carelessness, were suddenly made to appear vital parts of his outlook on life.

I began the next morning to read the poems on which for years I had so solemnly lectured. I was amazed to find what a change my new perspective had wrought. The old truths which had thrilled me so many times were there, but, like a well-mounted jewel, they gained new beauty and significance from their setting. The religious teachings which I had found so helpful gained rather than lost by the broader human values out of which they arose. I began to wonder if, after all, the Browningites and their successors had not been on the wrong track. So much has been said of Browning as a philosopher, so much of his obscurity has been laid to the profundity of his thought: I began to see that perhaps, after all, he was an artist rather than a philosopher, a seer rather than a thinker, and that much of his obscurity was due to the fact that he flew like a monoplane from peak to peak, leaving us mere thinkers toiling endlessly along the precipices, amid the fogs and through the tortuous trails of the valleys between.

Several years have passed since the experience

## OF THE POET AS ARTIST

I have described, years wherein my acquaintance with the work of the poet has broadened and deepened and my enjoyment in his poetry grown ever more vivid. I am less of a Browningite than ever. I no longer sit awe-struck at his profound commonplaces. I am not always certain of the value of his theological doctrines. I am quite convinced that, after being told by a generation of profound and learned critics that he was a philosopher, Mr. Browning came in his old age to take himself at their valuation, and that he tried with only a measure of success after "The Ring and The Book" to *be* a philosopher. At any rate, for my own part I could cheerfully lose almost everything he wrote after that date (unlike Professor Saintsbury, I would except "Balaustion") and not feel impoverished. Flashes there are of the old fire, moments of vision, of the old joy in life for its own sake,

The beauty and the wonder and the power,  
The shapes of things, their colors, lights, and shades,  
Changes, surprises.

But too often "there has passed away a glory from the earth," and one is conscious only of the poet's effort to recreate by main strength the old feeling. Argument takes the place of vision, and one can only regretfully acknowledge that the inspiration of the prophet is like the wind that bloweth where it listeth and is the free gift of God. In this we have only one more instance of an old phenomenon.

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

Shakespeare alone of bards—has not someone said?—knew when to retire to wool-growing and miss the age of wool-gathering.

Perhaps a single illustration will make clear the change which I have described in my attitude toward the poet. At the height of my early enthusiasm, when I was lecturing before the women's clubs, a lady came to me and with pathetic earnestness asked me what was the meaning of the poem entitled "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis." She had been told by some one that it was a remarkable poem with a very important lesson—which she had been unable to discover—and she sought my help. I read the poem with great thoughtfulness, with intense concentration of spirit, desiring earnestly to know what profound spiritual lesson could be conveyed by this incident of the burial and resurrection of the pedantic old book. It was in vain. I had to confess to my friend that I gave it up. I could see neither rhyme nor reason in the incident or the telling of it. There was no theological doctrine so far as I could understand, no significant spiritual crisis. The whole thing was apparently one of those aberrations of an earnest soul when under the influence of some demonic power he failed to take himself seriously, and so wasted "a fire God gave for other ends."

Chesterton should have supplied the clue when he wrote that the two poems entitled "Garden Fancies" were intended to teach the abstruse philosophical doctrine: the first that a woman may

## OF THE POET AS ARTIST

be charming, the second, that a book may be a bore; but the witty comment failed to pierce the dense armor of my Philistinism, and the poem remained a blank until that evening when my eyes were opened. How vividly I saw it!—the glorious summer morning, full of the sweetness of June sunshine, of birds and flowers—wasted in the soul-weariness of wading through a book in which there was none of the milk of human-kindness, none of the wine of life, nothing of the freshness and interest of a vivid human sympathy, but only barren learning thrice-removed from all contact with the living world which God made. How eagerly and sympathetically I followed the poet as, the book disposed of in the plum-tree crevice, he

Went indoors, brought out a loaf,  
Half a cheese and a bottle of Chablis,  
Lay on the grass and forgot the oaf  
Over a jolly chapter of Rabelais!

And his glee over the state of the book when a month later he fished it solemnly up, and burying it on his shelves amid seven other books more useless than the first, whole-heartedly bade it "Dry-rot at ease till the judgment day!"

I enjoyed the incident solely for its own sake, without looking for any spiritual interpretation or philosophical doctrine. It was a jolly little glimpse of real life with which I entirely sympathized. I too have been bored by books, but have been debarred my revenge. The trick he played on the pedantic old scholar was worth

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

doing, in the first place, and worth telling, in the second, for the sheer fun of it, and because life is too good and sweet a thing to be wasted on such vanity and vexation of spirit.

Then I reflected, to my own amazement, this is a spiritual lesson! This is a philosophical teaching; and it is hinted at in the poem itself by all that wild riot of the joy of living that goes on in the hollow of the plum-tree while the dry-as-dust old scholar merely shivers and shrivels up in entire failure to understand:

All that life and fun and romping,  
All that frisking and twisting and coupling,  
While slowly our poor friend's leaves were swamping,  
And clasps were cracking and covers suppling,  
As if you had carried sour John Knox  
To the playhouse at Paris, Vienna or Munich,  
Fastened him into a front-row box  
And danced off the ballet with trousers and tunic.

## II

I began to apply my new-found method elsewhere, and I found that everywhere the poet looked upon life with the artist's frank pleasure in its manifold beauty and interest; that any character which piqued his curiosity, any incident which caught his attention, was worth transcribing for its own sake, as a painter fills his sketchbook with this flower and that clump of trees, this bank of clouds and that sunset:

God's works—paint anyone, and count it crime  
To let a truth slip.

## OF THE POET AS ARTIST

To be sure, this in itself constitutes a philosophy of life and is the key to much else in the poet's teaching. Also, no doubt, every artist has a philosophy, and consciously or unconsciously employs his art in the interest of his creed. But "I think this is the authentic sign and seal" of artisthood that it "holds the mirror up to nature"; in other words, that it enters sympathetically into all the moods of the world about us and endeavors to interpret them to us, so that we too may be made to feel their beauty and significance and be brought into harmony with them. The art of poetry, of course, differs from music or the plastic arts in that its effects are wrought through ideas, and not through harmony of sound or visible forms, and hence the intellectual content is greater. We demand and expect a larger measure of intellectual truth. But rhymed and rhythmic philosophy is not poetry. We look first for vision, for intuitive, emotional understanding of nature and life. There doubtless is such a thing as didactic poetry, but in the main the adjective and the noun destroy each other. Even hymnology reveals the common emotional and idealistic element which underlies theological differences. The hymns which live, which move the heart and inspire the spirit, are neither Catholic nor Protestant, Liberal nor Orthodox, Calvinist nor Arminian. They are the expression of the emotions engendered by the contemplation of truth rather than that of truth itself.

The "teaching" of true poetry, if this view be

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

correct, is, accordingly, secondary and incidental. It is an effect wrought by the poetic vision, first in the mind of the poet himself and next in that of the reader. We read Shakespeare and Goethe and Dante primarily for the sake of the variety and richness of life as it appears in their pages; that is to say, for the understanding and sympathy and power with which they have portrayed it. It is only after we have felt and appreciated that power that we go on to ask what lessons the poet himself drew from the things he described or what he desired to teach us. Sometimes, to be sure, the subject of the poem may be a mood, or an idea, or the operation of an idea upon a man's feeling and action. In such a case we seem to have come directly upon the workings of the poet's mind and to be put in possession of his thought about life. But even here the truth in the poet's soul must be truthfully embodied in the life he depicts, and suggested by it. We are dealing with prose rather than poetry if the idea which forms the groundwork of the poem is not somehow universalized through the poet's emotions rather than his understanding, so that it is our own emotions and intuitions that are appealed to first of all, and the reason waits as handmaid upon the imagination.

That Browning sometimes philosophizes when we want him to poetize, and that the tendency grew upon him with age, I have already admitted. The same thing was true of Wordsworth. Mat-

## OF THE POET AS ARTIST

threw Arnold declared that all of Wordsworth that is worth reading was written during a brief period of ten years in the middle of a long life. Only the most abandoned Wordsworthian can find any poetry in the wearisome prosing of the "Excursion." It is not this that gives the poet of Rydal Mount his place in our hearts; but his simple and beautiful descriptions of nature and humble life, his exquisite sensitiveness to beauty, his power to discover "Joy in widest commonalty spread." When he aspires to be a philosopher we part company. If Browning is primarily a philosopher rather than a poet, as so many of his critics and admirers seek to prove, then his place in the literary history of the nineteenth century will be determined by the soundness of his reasoning, the value of his contribution to our interpretation of life. But if, as I believe, he is primarily an artist, then his place is to be fixed by the skill and power with which he has made his appeal to our heart and our imagination. His philosophical teaching may be sound, or it may be subject to the common aberrations which beset the abstract thinker. But if his artistic intuitions are sure, we may draw our own philosophical conclusions quite undisturbed by any question regarding his. The lasting beauty and significance of the "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality" do not depend on our acceptance of the doctrine of the preexistence of the soul, but on the appeal which the poem makes to our sense of beauty and the power with



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

which the poet has depicted some of the phases of our common human experience. So the worth and beauty of "Rabbi Ben Ezra" do not depend on our belief in immortality, but, rather, on the power of the poem to challenge the will and inspire us to live greatly.

There seems to be a very conspiracy to refuse Browning a place in the category of artists of this sort and to force him into the ranks of the philosophers and theologians. His admirers have offended no less than his critics. On the one hand, we have the never-ending procession of volumes, large and small, upon his teachings. On the other hand, we have the various pronouncements of the critics, from the *Edinburgh Review* to Paul Elmer More, regarding his limitations as a poet. Of his teaching I shall have somewhat to say in another place, but I have a few more pearls to cast to the critics.

That there are in Browning's poetry occasional passages of limpid clearness and great poetic beauty is everywhere admitted. The dedication of "The Ring and The Book," beginning,

O Lyric Love, half-angel and half-bird,  
And all a wonder and a wild desire,

is pure vision. The love song in the first act of "The Blot in the 'Scutcheon," the prologue to "Two Poets of Croisic," the lines in "Paracelsus" beginning, "Spring wind, like a dancing psaltress," and hundreds of other passages bear witness to the

## OF THE POET AS ARTIST

poet's power to sing directly to the heart. But are these passages of sufficient number and extent, amid the vast expanse of Browning's work, to justify his hold on the world? Is not the real interest in his writings rather to be found partly in the pleasure of working out an intellectual puzzle; partly in the psychological interest—his marvelous skill in depicting what Mr. More has called "suspended psychology," that peculiar mental state in which a man at once acts and stands apart from himself and judges his action; but chiefly in the direct appeal of his philosophy of life?

That there is an element of truth here must be admitted. Browning's philosophy of life is a very vigorous one and does appeal to very many earnest and eager-hearted men and women. His skill in portraying a complex state of mind and emotion is unrivaled. That way of getting at things, of telling a story almost by indirection as it were, which is peculiarly Browningsque, has a fascination all its own. But is this all? And if it were all, would it have no place in true art? Must we reject the Flemish painters because they learned art from the goldsmiths, and wrought their backgrounds with loving care instead of cultivating the delicate spiritual mood of Botticelli with his dainty allegories, or imitating Fra Angelico, who gives us "no more of flesh than shows soul"? If Browning's poems embody a philosophy, does not "In Memoriam" as well? If Browning has his

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

own way of telling a story, must we reject it because it is not Byron's nor Keats', provided only the story be interesting and the poet succeed in "getting it across"? If the subject-matter which he delights most to paint be the complex states of human emotion in the presence of great spiritual crises, shall we object to the skill with which he does it and say, as Satan said to Adam, "It's pretty, but is it Art?"

Mr. More, to whom I have already referred, declares that the average reader of to-day is "ready to accede to any legitimate demand upon his analytical understanding, but responds sluggishly, if at all, to the readjustment of emotions necessary for the sustained enjoyment of such a poem as 'Paradise Lost.'" He also speaks of the poetical mood as "the translation of the intellect from the particular to the general point of view," and asserts that it is the particularizing habit of Browning, his method of concentrating attention on the individual, and that too at a particular moment or crisis, which forbids "that escape into the larger and more general vision which marks the transition from prose to poetry."

Admitting that the appeal of Browning's poetry is not the same as that of "Paradise Lost," is the remainder of this indictment true? Is the reader of Browning held to the particular and prevented from escaping into the larger and freer atmosphere of poetry? Browning's characters are powerfully individual, it is true, but is their appeal any the

## OF THE POET AS ARTIST

less universal for that? Was Caliban the last to create God in his own image? Was Bishop Blougram the only modernist who has hesitated to cut loose from tradition? Is Cleon alone in refusing the message for which his heart hungers, merely because he despises the medium through which it comes? To be sure, this sort of poetry is not the same as that found in the dedication of "The Ring and The Book." Its emotional appeal is less direct, more intellectual. None the less the appeal is not to our analytical reason, but to our imaginative sympathy. The method of the poet is that of the artist, namely, the embodiment of the general in the particular, the depicting of an individual who through the very self-identity of his individuality becomes a type. The appeal is, first of all, to our feeling of identity with the type, through which we recognize and interpret much that was obscure in our own feelings and fate. To say this is not poetry is to object to the "Iliad" because it is not the lyrics of Sappho, or to reject "Prometheus Unbound" because it is not the "Skylark."

In point of fact, we seem to have come here upon the old debate between the realist and the impressionist in art. The latter maintains that since the object of art is universal, the marks of the particular in its subject should be obliterated as much as possible. Since the purpose of the artist is to awaken an emotion in the beholder, it is necessary only that those objects which have called forth

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

the same emotion in the breast of the artist be suggested, rather than depicted. Starting with this philosophy, the development of Futurism is entirely logical. The noted painting of the "Nude Descending a Staircase," while assuredly not suggestive in the old, crude, fleshly sense, might perhaps—if we were instructed—be entirely competent to suggest to the observer the emotions with which the artist gazed upon the original. What the artist has really undertaken to do is to paint, not the object, but the emotion.

The realist, on the other hand, bases his art on the conviction that it is only by being entirely and particularly individual that anything in nature becomes a type of the general. That man is the most truly representative of humankind whose personality is most developed, who is most distinctively and thoroughly individual. It is only because Abraham's faith was so unique in its vividness and entire self-surrender that Abraham becomes the type and father of the faithful. It is only because Hamlet's problem is so concrete and definite that his vacillation and self-distrust become a mirror of human weakness and slackness of purpose. It is just the power to see the all in little, "from a dewdrop to educe the world," that makes the artist.

The truth which underlies impressionism seems to be simply this, that art is not photography, mere accuracy of reproduction. Its task is to bring out what is essential; to reproduce a mood,

## OF THE POET AS ARTIST

an emotion, a spiritual meaning, which the observer might overlook, but which is plain to the soul of the artist. Browning himself has expressed the principle most clearly through the mouth of Lippo, and with a passion which indicates the significance of the words to his own soul:

“For don’t you mark? we’re made so that we love  
First when we see them painted, things we have passed  
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;  
And so they are better, painted—better to us,  
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;  
God uses us to help each other so,  
Lending our minds out. Have you noticed, now,  
Your cullion’s hanging face? A bit of chalk,  
And trust me that you should, though! How much  
more  
If I drew higher things with the same truth!  
That were to take the Prior’s pulpit-place,  
Interpret God to all of you!”

The pathway to this goal lies between the Scylla of a barren realism, on the one hand, which sinks all ideal significance in mere accuracy of detail; and the Charybdis of a bodiless emotionalism, on the other, seeking to portray an abstract significance unrelated to anything which the eye hath seen or the ear heard. In the first case we have gained nothing, since the artist has shown us nothing which the dullest might not see for himself. In the second case one is reminded of that scholastic philosopher of the “nominalist” school who asked his pupils to bring him fruit: they brought pears and apples, when the master explained that these

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

were *fruits*—what he desired was fruit-in-general. A Cubist artist might have supplied him!

I have inadvertently wandered a good way into the field of artistic criticism, wherein no doubt I have displayed a lamentable ignorance—a buffalo in the temple! What I have been trying to do in all this talk of matters too high for me is to explain what I mean by insisting that Browning is an artist first and a thinker, a philosopher, afterward. I am trying, with an obscurity perchance more involved than the poet's own, to say, first, that Browning seems to me to be interested mainly in making us see what he has seen in the world rather than in persuading us to think about it as he thinks—a thing which I take to be the true aim of all art and of poetry not least; and, second, that he seems to me to have been not altogether unsuccessful in this aim.

### III

Of course it is required, first of all, in an artist that his work be found beautiful. It is likewise needful that it hold somewhat of human interest. The defenders of "Art for Art's sake" have poured their scorn on the Philistinism which wants a picture to "tell a story" and can enjoy only program music. But even the Fifth Symphony gains significance through the idea of "Fate knocking at the door," and Raphael's Madonnas would lose in power if not in loveliness did the beholder know nothing of the gospel story.

## OF THE POET AS ARTIST

Inquiry concerning the artist's method, his skill in the mastery of his materials, comes last of all.

Of the human interest in Browning's poetry volumes have been, might still be written. As he told us in "Sordello," humanity was his first love; we need no telling that it was his last. He observed men and women as Burns observed the daisy or Wordsworth the small celandine. He thrilled with the interest of human happenings as his fellowpoet's

. . . heart with pleasure fills  
And dances with the daffodils.

Wordsworth finds his humble neighbors of the Lake district worth observing, their simple doings worth telling, but he has small interest in humanity at large. Like his own Lucy, he "dwelt among untrodden ways," and heard only as an undertone welling up through the harmonies of nature,

The still, sad music of humanity,  
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
To chasten and subdue.

It was his lack of faith in humanity, his belief that "The world is too much with us," which transformed the early enthusiasm inspired by the French Revolution into the disillusionment of the settled Tory, and gave rise to Browning's "The Lost Leader."

Tennyson likewise dwelt somewhat apart from humankind. He fled from the celebrity-hunters who haunted the Isle of Wight, and could with



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

difficulty be lured to visit London. The human interest in Tennyson, accordingly, is more abstract. It is with humanity at large that he is concerned, its problems of faith, its social ideals, its general welfare. Though he loves to tell a simple tale, though occasional monologues like "The Northern Farmer" show that he could conceive a striking individual type, yet, in the main, his mind moves in the more abstract realm. Of the generation that produced Kingsley and Morris and Carlyle and Ruskin, he is only half conscious that there is a social problem. He could write "Locksley Hall" and the opening stanzas of "Maud" and yet be incapable of sympathizing with the spirit of bitter social revolt, the "red fool-fury of the Seine." His characterizations tend to become bloodless abstractions of ethical principles, as in the "Idylls." It is when he depicts a simple human emotion, clothing it in all its power of pathos or of passion, that he rises to his greatest height.

Browning, on the other hand, is a dweller in cities, a lover of the thronged streets and crowded ways. He finds his field in the individual human soul, particularly in moments of supreme moral struggle, in the great spiritual crises whence a man emerges saved or lost. He is even less conscious than Tennyson of the social movements of the nineteenth century, though his social sympathies are sound. For him poverty and struggle are not so much social facts as the materials out of which

## OF THE POET AS ARTIST

the individual is to construct his life. The significance of this individual note for the interpretation of life, even in the presence of social problems, is a matter for later consideration. It is of moment now to note that in breadth of human interest and in power to delineate character Browning is to be compared and contrasted with the great master-singers of modern literature, with Goethe and Shakespeare and Dante, rather than with his contemporaries.

It is true that with them we stand in the presence of universal genius. They are everywhere master of their materials. Browning's genius has no such range. A Pilgrim through Hell to Paradise, whose experience should embody the whole spiritual history of the human soul; a Doctor Faustus who should gather up into himself the experiences of universal humanity, lie entirely beyond his scope. To behold all the world a stage and all the men and women merely players; and to people that stage with a host of characters, each bearing his own distinct individuality and playing his own part amid the shifting scenes of this complex drama of life, is equally beyond his power. None the less Browning's universal sympathy makes him next of kin, while in his own chosen field of the individual soul, of the hidden drama whose action takes place within a man's own heart, he stands without a peer. It is his gift to interpret the spiritual crises of life, to individualize them as the experience of distinct and concrete person-

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

alities; to cause every man to lay bare his heart before us, revealing all the manifold complexity of his spiritual conflicts and moral judgments, while at the same time making clear the essential character of that ultimate act in which these issue and find their unification. As has repeatedly been said, he is essentially a dramatist; but his interest is less in the conflict of wills, or of the will with fate, which constitutes the essence of objective drama, than in the inner and subjective conflicts within a man's own will; in which the impulses and desires, the ideals and passions, the higher and lower elements of his own nature

. . . rap and knock and enter in our soul,  
Take hands and dance there, a fantastic ring,

on the stage of the soul itself.

It must never be forgotten, however, that in these mighty dramas of human passion, from the poems of character which make up not only the "Men and Women" but also by far the greater number of the "Idylls" and "Romances" and "Lyrics" to the poet's most ambitious studies in "Paracelsus" and "Sordello" and "The Ring and The Book," it is the artist who speaks, not primarily the moralist or the philosopher. This is as true of "Blougram" or "Lippo" as of "A Face" or "Love Among the Ruins." The jealous girl in "In a Laboratory," the dying Bishop of "St. Praxed's," the heartless duke in "My Last Duchess," are simply painted for us without a

## OF THE POET AS ARTIST

word of comment. We feel, indeed, that in the moment of creation the poet felt an artistic sympathy with these creatures of his genius. They are human beings, the subjects of human experience. They are of like passions as we are, and just the revelation of the ways in which the human soul reacts in certain moods and under certain conditions is itself a sufficient contribution to our knowledge of life. Any moralizings which the occasion requires we may supply for ourselves, the poet will not do it for us. At the same time we are not left without the material for that moral judgment. In the case of the jealous girl seeking a poison with which to put her rival out of the way, the glimpses that are given us of the atmosphere of heartless coquetry with which she was surrounded and the scornful contempt she has suffered bid us judge her not too harshly or unsympathetically, while at the same time we are left under no illusion as to the character of her mad passion of hate. In "My Last Duchess" the icy refinement, the cold culture, the heartless pride and inhumanity of the duke are thrown into high relief by the glimpse he himself gives us of the sweet and simple-hearted girl whose too-ready smile and gentle courtesy were her undoing.

### IV

And still I have not reached my goal; I have not proved to the skeptical that this is poetry. It may be art, it may be dramatic, it is undoubtedly

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

interesting and skillfully done, but it may likewise be more nearly related to the essay or the novel than to poetry. Has it the essential beauty and passion, the imaginative power appealing directly to the emotions, which we associate with the idea of poetry? I can speak only for myself. I find such power not only in the lyric passages I have already referred to, but in whole cantos of "The Ring and The Book," to say nothing of such interpretations of deep human experience as "Andrea" and "Karshish" and "Abt Vogler," of the lofty reaches of "The Last Ride Together" or of "Love in a Life" and "Life in a Love."

Matthew Arnold has taught us that no art is truly great, no matter how skillfully wrought, unless its subject-matter be worthy. We do not always sufficiently consider that the beauty of any work of art may inhere chiefly in the subject-matter rather than in the execution. It must, of course, be sufficiently embodied. No beauty of subject can make up for crudeness of drawing and color, for slovenliness or lack of skill in the treatment. The subject is the same in all the Madonnas, whether that rigid and wooden work in Santa Maria Novello, attributed to Cimabue, or the smooth and saccharine pictures of Carlo Dolci; the prettily thoughtful though exquisitely wrought paintings of Andrea, or the soul-moving masterpieces of Raphael. The essential difference between the artists is in the depth of their insight and the power of their treatment. On the other

## OF THE POET AS ARTIST

hand, no skill of craftsmanship can atone for lack of beauty or worth in the subject-matter. Even Michelangelo could carve a Leda which is not called to the attention of lady visitors to the Pitti gallery, and some of Rubens's abominations are familiar to everyone. With all this in mind, it remains true that one artist impresses us most with the richness of beauty and significance in his conception, another with his mastery of his craft. It is this distinction which Browning himself embodied in his contrast between Raphael and Andrea:

I can fancy how he did it all,  
Pouring his soul, with kings and popes to see,  
Reaching, that heaven might so replenish him,  
Above and through his art—for it gives way;  
That arm is wrongly put—and there again—  
A fault to pardon in the drawing's lines,  
Its body, so to speak: its soul is right,  
He means right—that, a child may understand.  
Still, what an arm! and I could alter it:  
But all the play, the insight and the stretch—  
Out of me, out of me!

This distinction between artists is perhaps even more significant in poetry than in painting. Poe, for example, for all his genuine feeling for beauty and his unrivaled dexterity in the manipulation of words, has never seriously impressed mankind as a great poet, because of a certain shallowness of sentiment and morbidness of temper which make themselves felt in his finest flights. Burns, or even James Whitcomb Riley at his best—is it sacrilege to bracket them together?—without a

## CONFESSIONS OF A. BROWNING LOVER

tithe of Poe's actual skill, will nevertheless outlive him in the hearts of men by reason of the greater soundness of their humanity, the simple appeal of their message.

The beauty of Browning's poetry is to be found in the substance rather than the form, the soul rather than the body, of his work. By substance I mean not subject-matter alone, but the conceptions, the point of view, the imagery, the atmosphere, which together sometimes so thrill the reader with their wealth of beauty that he forgets entirely the medium through which the impression is made.

The other kind of poetry has perhaps a wider appeal. If there are comparatively few even among cultivated readers who find their greatest enjoyment in the epic, in Milton or Dante, there are very many to whom lyric poetry affords an abiding joy. The matchless grace of form in "Midsummernight's Dream" charms us without regard to the substance of the verse. Or, to come to the nineteenth century, such poetry as Shelley's "Cloud" certainly lives in its own right. Could anything exceed the limpid music of the lines,

That orb'd maiden with white fire laden  
Whom mortals call the moon,  
Glides glimmering o'er my fleece-like floor,  
By the midnight breezes strewn,  
And wherever the beat of her unseen feet,  
Which only the angels hear,  
May have broken the woof of my tent's thin roof  
The stars peep behind her and peer—

## OF THE POET AS ARTIST

can we not hear the soundless pattering of fairy feet whose least fall breaks the gauze-web of the summer mist? The fancy is quaint and suggestive, and the imagery lovely; but both alike would fail to move us so deeply did the verse not catch the ear and carry the imagination fairly to elf-land by its delicate rhythm. Indeed, Professor Trent goes so far as to say that the music is everywhere the chief thing in Shelley. If it be so, God be praised for its loveliness, which sings many a faery fancy into our hearts to lighten the dreariness of a work-worn world.

Kipling has declared that there are only five lines amid all the boundless vast of English verse which are pure vision—the rest is merely poetry. The first are from “Kubla Khan”:

A savage place, as holy and enchanted  
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted  
By woman wailing for her demon lover

—lines whose drugged and languorous sweetness affects the senses like incense from an Oriental temple. The other two are from Keats:

Charmed magic casements, opening on the form  
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn,

where the words toll like a silver bell. I am content with Kipling's verdict. Surely, music and magic were never so wedded in sound and sense. It is impossible to say that the effect is wrought only through the beauty of the lines; the weird



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

suggestiveness of the imagery charms us as well. Such beauty is its own excuse for being. One does not ask in such a case what the poem means, what spiritual lesson it conveys; one only catches one's breath and lifts up one's heart. Keats was right:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty:  
That is all ye know or need to know.

If you get simple beauty and naught else,  
You get about the best thing God invents;  
That's somewhat, and you'll find the soul you've missed  
Within yourself when you return him thanks.  
("Fra Lippo Lippi.")

It is not this sort of beauty we find in Browning's poetry. The beauty of "My Star," of the tribute to Shelley in "Memorabilia," the exquisite tenderness of "One Word More," the sense of atmosphere, of evening restfulness in "Love Among the Ruins," find adequate expression in the verse, but the reader is conscious chiefly of the beauty of thought and feeling, rather than of the form. It is true that in many single passages, both in the poems just referred to and in many others, the vision of the poet rises to the utmost height, and the music of the verse matches the beauty of the thought conveyed; but that other beauty, of conception and imagery, of sympathy and passion, is everywhere. Whole pages of "Paracelsus" and "Sordello" are fairly weighed down with excess of beauty. In "Saul" it rises to very ecstasy, as where the young singer awakes

## OF THE POET AS ARTIST

In the gray dewy covert, while Hebron upheaves  
The dawn struggling with night on his shoulder,  
and Kidron retrieves  
Slow the damage of yesterday's sunshine.

And again in the passage which tells how the  
sympathetic passion awakened in nature by the  
revelation of Divine Love made to the king  
through the heart of the boy was slowly quelled:

Not so much, but I saw it die out in the day's tender  
birth;  
In the gathered intensity brought to the gray of the  
hills;  
In the shuddering forests' held breath; in the sudden  
wind-thrills;

The same stared in the white humid faces upturned by  
the flowers;  
The same worked in the heart of the cedar and moved  
the vine-bowers:  
And the little brooks witnessing murmured, persistent  
and low,  
With their obstinate, all but hushed voices,  
"E'en so, it is so"!

My own conviction is that if all the theological  
and philosophical *tours de force* about which the  
discussions of the critics and the women's clubs  
have raged for fifty years were eliminated, there  
would still remain of Browning's poems a volume  
of verse which for sheer beauty and intrinsic ar-  
tistic power—the soul of beauty, not its flesh—  
would be sufficient to assure him high rank and  
an abiding place among English poets. If it were  
all collected in a single volume, it is a question if

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

any similar collection from the poetry of Wordsworth or Tennyson would be found to contain so much of warm human emotion or rich poetic imagery, of genuine and compelling beauty of thought and feeling.

Other considerations than that of simple beauty, of course, come into play in much of Browning's work which has abiding interest for the reader. The poems that deal with passion and jealousy and envy and hatred, which embody such characters as the monk of the "Spanish Cloister," or the husband of "A Forgiveness," or Count Guido Franceschini, are poetry not by virtue of artistic beauty but of emotional intensity and power. Even the *grotesqueries*—"Holy Cross Day," "Sludge," "Caliban," "Master Hugues," and others—have an abiding worth. To say they are not poetry is merely to draw an arbitrary line through all literature. They are wrought from the artist's point of view; they are skillfully done withal; and they grip the imagination and convey truth by direct emotional and artistic appeal rather than by argumentation. If that be prose, make the most of it! It may be that some of them are comparable to the gargoyles of Notre Dame or the Imp of Lincoln Cathedral rather than to the Pieta or the Moses of Michelangelo, but some of us would rather not lose even those lighter products of a sculptor's chisel.

On the other hand, let us cheerfully admit defects. Like his own Raphael, the poet reaches

## OF THE POET AS ARTIST

above and through his art. There are crude and uncouth rhymes, commonplace and unpoetic words and phrases:

Fee, faw, fum, bubble and squeak,  
Blessedest Thursday's the fat of the week.

What porridge had John Keats?

Irks care the crop-full bird, frets doubt the maw-crammed beast?

Examples might be multiplied. It should be said, indeed, Chesterton has vigorously said, that frequently the use of such apparent *gaucheries* is part of the poet's method of getting the effects at which he aims, as Strauss and Debussy and Schoenberg employ dissonances on the road to harmony which ought to make Bach and Beethoven turn in their graves. So far as I am concerned, however, I am no *advocatus diaboli*, I hold no brief for these things: let them be cast as rubbish to the void. And with them go much involved construction, tedious, overloaded sentences, much display of learning, to say nothing of all the prosy philosophizing already discarded. Had Browning possessed the patience or skill or artistic sensitiveness to eliminate these defects, his poetry would have gained in power. But what would one have? Homer nods. Shakespeare is ribald. Wordsworth descends to worse than commonplace prose. Tennyson often is "faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null."

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

So Raphael's cartoons are not always impressive. Angelo's "Day," on the Medici tomb, twists his head in defiance of anatomy. Rodin, as well as the great Florentine, has left much half-finished marble.

Browning's songs seldom sing themselves. His lines do not readily fasten themselves in the memory. His ear is deficient in rhythm—we are told his own physical pulse was imperceptible. All this is merely to admit that the poet is human, and works, like other artists, sometimes by main strength. But it is to be said that when he is swept along on the full tide of his genius these defects disappear; and the verse, in "Saul" and "Cleon" and "Abt Vogler" and many another passage of matchless beauty and power, marches with a triumphant swing which bears the reader with it oblivious of the means whereby the will of the poet is wrought upon his soul.

It is as an artist, therefore, that I find my enjoyment in the poet; an artist with a serious purpose withal, whose message is embedded in his art. The message itself, as Kipling says, is another story.

## CHAPTER II

### OF ARTISTS AND PHILOSOPHERS

THE statement of my change of heart with regard to Browning, when I came to look upon him as first of all an artist and only secondarily a philosopher, has led me a good ways afield into a discussion of the principles of art. What I have sought to do is to justify my own enthusiasm for Browning's poetry *as poetry*; for its tropical wealth and profusion of beauty, for its unrivaled human interest, for the spiritual inspiration afforded by its outlook upon life. It remains to tell something of the lessons I have learned from it.

But at the risk of talking more about myself and my notions than about the poet who is the ostensible occasion of these outpourings I cannot forbear to dwell a little further on the spirit and temper of which I have been speaking—on the essential worth of the artistic as distinguished from the philosophic viewpoint. I might, no doubt, have learned it from Shakespeare or Keats. But, *mirabile dictu*, I for one learned it from the very poet who is universally supposed to have subordinated the emotional to the intellectual, to have been a thinker rather than a poet, to have aimed first of all at proclaiming a

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

message rather than at awakening the sense of beauty.

I make haste to concede to those who have been bred in the tradition, that Browning has a message, a significant one, in which he himself was intensely interested, and to which I hope eventually to get round. But the notion that he chose the artistic way to declare his truth, and that he must be approached in a spirit not essentially other than that in which we read Shakespeare or look at Raphael's Madonnas, has been received with such astonished incredulity when I have ventured to broach it among the devotees of culture that I am constrained to give a further reason for the faith that is in me. The first lesson I, at any rate, have learned from Browning is the lesson of sitting at the feet of an artist; learning to see through his eyes, to catch his vision, to adopt his point of view, to let myself go with him until he has wrought his will upon me, careless what comes of it; confident that if he has a message for the world this is the only way to get it.

### I

The artistic spirit has always been distrusted by the moralists, from Plato to Tolstoy. Nor is the reason far to seek. To begin with, the artists themselves have in the main been a sorry lot, unconventional, not to say Bohemian, in their mode of life; creatures of impulse and emotion rather than of reason and judgment; inclined to

## OF ARTISTS AND PHILOSOPHERS

a sad lack of reverence for *bourgeois* standards of taste and morals. That Saul, the son of a highly respectable middle-class father of considerable means, should be found among the prophets has always been considered rather a disgrace.

Then, too, the ideas advanced by the artist have been lacking in that practical quality which appeals to the essentially Philistine public. He has been prone to the dilettante attitude toward life, or when he inclined to take himself seriously his pronouncements have been too visionary and idealistic to be worthy of consideration by serious men. Like Shelley, he is apt to be a "beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain."

Finally, the things in which the artist is interested, which are the very breath of life to him, are of the sort which butter no parsnips. To sing a snatch, to paint a flower, to carve a Venus, while all around are men and women starving for bread, while enemies threaten the fatherland, while sinners are dying in their sins, is, like Nero, to fiddle while Rome is burning.

One is tempted at this point to turn aside to see if a good word might not be said for Nero. I sometimes wonder that Browning himself did not take it up—he who was ever prone to discover what those whom all men despised might find in their hearts to say for themselves. We may yet expect Chesterton to convince us that the emperor was a grossly maligned and much misunder-



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

stood individual, or G. B. S. to turn our ideas topsy-turvy with a play on the philosophic soul who when infinite disaster overwhelmed the Eternal City, and nothing could be done to stay her fate, sought consolation in music, or who, rapt to ecstatic heights by the very breadth and sweep of the tragedy, endeavored to convey to others in deathless song the emotions through which the soul-cleansing significance of the event transformed life itself for the singer. I do not myself insist on this point of view. Nero was doubtless a half-mad degenerate, who found an idiotic enjoyment in the spectacle and whose paranoiac egoism imagined none other could so fitly enshrine the epic tragedy in verse. But he is *not* for that reason the fitter type of those who find pleasure and meaning in the beauty and joy of the world.

Possibly Nero is too savage to stand as the type of the artistic temperament in the thought of the average moralist, but none the less there is a popular feeling that the artistic spirit is lacking in moral earnestness, that it fails to comprehend the tremendous seriousness of life. It is regarded as essentially pagan rather than Christian. It accepts the world as it is instead of striving to redeem and reform it. Especially does this seem to be true of mere virtuosity. Creative art may be granted some place in the scheme of things, but the art which simply reproduces or expresses the thought of another seems trivial, a waste of ability and energy which, if applied to ends

## OF ARTISTS AND PHILOSOPHERS

worth while, might be of inestimable benefit to mankind. I confess to this feeling in the presence of a crack billiardist or world-famous ballet dancer, and even to be the greatest violinist or pianist in the world seems a trifling thing compared with the creative genius of a Beethoven.

But may we not recognize an element of truth here without thereby invalidating the right of the artist or his true place in the life of the world? The temptation, the besetting sin of art is the dilettante spirit, as pharisaism is that of the moralist. We may applaud the zeal which drove the traders from the temple, and no less the moral earnestness which rebukes the sentimental æstheticism of Oscar Wilde or the license of the Boul' Mich'; but all this has nothing to do with the deeper question of the meaning of beauty or the prophetic function of those who open our eyes that we may see.

Plato's attitude toward the artist was based on other grounds. The poets were to be excluded from the Republic only in so far as they were bad theologians and did not tell the truth. On the other hand, painters and sculptors must be accounted mere copyists of nature, who is herself an indifferent copyist of the divine Idea. Art, therefore, stood twice-removed from essential truth, and could not be seriously regarded by the philosopher. For this reason the artists, though they bring somewhat of grace and joy into life, and therefore must be accorded some place, were to

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

be ranked next above the laborers and artisans, the hewers of wood and the drawers of water; while the philosophers, those who seek truth, and truth alone, as the chief good, were to be obeyed as the natural guardians of the state.

Tolstoy's indictment of art is that it has become a cult, and has removed itself from the sphere of common life. The original contract between the laborer and the artist was that the former would bear the brunt and furnish the means of subsistence in return for the inspiration, the brightening of life, and the lightening of toil which the latter should afford through his art. But when the cultivation of art elevated the taste of the artist above that of the artisan, and so established an impassable gulf between the cultivated soul and the horny-handed son of toil, the contract was broken. Art must, therefore, be disciplined and humbled until it shall once more serve the common life, or submit to be driven forth from the world of men.

The Puritan temper was still more severe. The Puritan saw in beauty a snare of the soul, a device of the Evil One to lure men from the thorny way of spiritual culture to tread the primrose path of dalliance. Augustine records with penitent shame the day when the beauty of the Italian landscape so entranced his sight that for an hour he forgot the claims of the spirit and neglected to meditate on the duty he owed to God. The soldiers of Cromwell who defaced the abbeys and cathedrals

## OF ARTISTS AND PHILOSOPHERS

of England, the rugged moralists who saw in statues only graven images in defiance of the second commandment, and who distrusted everything which added grace and sweetness to human life lest the souls of men should nestle in this world nor seek their rightful home above, were the spiritual descendants of Augustine.

Yet herein is a marvelous thing, that the men who have seen most deeply into the essential meaning and purpose of life and have added the largest treasure to the spiritual riches of the race have been artists at heart—of whom Plato himself is not least. His philosophy is embedded in artistic forms, and it is, in point of fact, his artist's intuition more than his logical reason which has led him most deeply into the truth. The Hebrew prophets were poets, and it is precisely when the prophetic fire burned most intensely and their visions of God attained the loftiest heights that their art is most perfect. If the plastic arts of Greece or the painting of the High Renaissance were not always accompanied by the greatest spiritual insight, or failed to minister to the deepest spiritual needs, it was not because of any inherent antagonism between truth and beauty, but simply because life comes to us only in fragmentary glimpses, and mankind forever advances a step at a time, first one foot and then the other.

It was Plato himself who declared the essential truth of the matter, namely, that the beautiful is

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

at bottom one with the good and the true—that all three are alike expressions of the Perfection which underlies all finite existence and which men call God. Scientist, moralist, artist, all alike are searchers after God, ministers of his divine perfections, nor can any one of them dispense with the others. The scientist desires to know facts, the philosopher to discover their underlying principles; both find their results inextricably entangled with ethical implications. They must either become moralists or turn their work over to the moralist to be completed, to be used, indeed, for the practical and spiritual instruction of mankind. Facts and principles run up into laws, and laws at bottom are an ethical matter, having their root not in the barren necessities of a purposeless mechanism, but in the self-consistency of an eternal Will. To stop short of this is to deny any significance whatever to reality and to put an end to the possibility not only of ethics but of science. The attitude of the average scientist at this point is comparable to the performance of that celebrated hero of popular song who, perched on a lofty limb, sawed between himself and the tree.

But this is not the end of the matter. These laws, this underlying Will, are forever finding expression in forms which hint at the perfection of the ideal and so awaken in men the sense of beauty. It is the function of beauty to bear witness to the ideal amid the imperfections of reality and the ignorance and blindness of the human soul.

## OF ARTISTS AND PHILOSOPHERS

Truth makes its appeal to the reason, ethical principles to the obedient will; beauty appeals to the emotions. It awakens love, and so brings about the identification of man with the world about him, with the divine it half-reveals and half-conceals. The cave man, ignorant and superstitious, surrounded by a hostile nature whose mysteries filled him with awe and fear, what time he scratched the figures of beasts of the chase upon scraps of reindeer bone or chiseled intricate patterns of line on the stones which marked the burying place of his dead, was lifted by these fragmentary glimpses of beauty into real communion with nature, and given a unity of spirit and a mastery of life which must wait many centuries to find expression in forms of knowledge or of ethical judgment.

If this be true, then beauty, so far from being a mere ornamental addition to life, is a fundamental necessity, an integral part of life itself. By it primitive man, chipping his spearheads into symmetry and fashioning ornaments of schist or bone, bore witness to his spiritual nature; and by it he, being dead, yet speaketh. It is the same spiritual impulse, developed and trained by centuries of struggle, which builds noble cathedrals for worship and clothes its loftiest visions of truth in forms of undying loveliness.

The function of beauty is twofold. It stands in its own right, bringing brightness and joy into life, relieving the heart weighed down by the

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

dullness and gray monotony of every day; softening our proud, fierce, selfish spirits by the tender emotions it awakens; and it is also the minister of truth. What Augustine and the Puritans failed to see was that the soul of man requires nurture no less than discipline; that the humanizing influence of beauty may soften the heart and prepare the soil for the good seed of spiritual truth which else had fallen on stony ground. They forgot the Hebrew teaching that Jehovah is to be worshiped in the holiness of beauty no less than in the beauty of holiness. A sound spiritual instinct lay behind the development of Gothic architecture and made the leaders of the church the chief patrons of the art of Raphael and Michelangelo.

Plato and Tolstoy overlooked the function of beauty as the witness of truth. Art is not, as Plato imagined, the imitator of nature, the mere copy of a copy. Art is truer than nature. It depicts the deeper reality after which nature strives. It is the minister of spiritual liberty, setting men free from the limitations of the actual, and suggesting the ideal which, nowhere, lies yet everywhere in the world. It bears with it intimations of a wholeness and perfection infinitely removed from the fragmentariness of our little experience. The perception of beauty opens the mind to suggestions which the dull reason has failed to heed. Even if the cultivation of the artistic spirit removes for a time the artist from the comradeship of his duller and less fortunate

## OF ARTISTS AND PHILOSOPHERS

brethren, that need not be to their loss, if it take  
him up into the mountain to behold

. . . the very God, the Highest,  
Stand upon the paved work of a sapphire,  
Like the bodied heaven for clearness.

Let him but come down from the mountain with  
the tables of truth in his hands; let him but store  
up—for future ages if need be—revelations of the  
ideal which his own time could not bear, and the  
pittance of food and shelter which is his meed is  
well bestowed at men's hands.

The artist is the minister of beauty. He it is  
who teaches us how to find it, who fashions it  
before our eyes, who awakens in our hearts,

Those first affections,  
Those shadowy recollections,  
Which, be they what they may,  
Are yet the fountain-light of all our day,  
Are yet a master-light of all our seeing.

Therefore our first duty to the artist is to await  
his pleasure, to borrow his ear and his eye, to let  
the light break in upon our souls from the vision  
which first enraptured him. It is his province to  
be, first of all, the seer, and after to make us see.  
Our hearts must vibrate to the thrill which quick-  
ened his pulses. To stop at this point to ask him  
what he meant, what lesson he had to teach, is an  
impertinence. Let us get the vision first, and  
then at our leisure we may discover what it means  
for us.



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

This is not to be lacking moral earnestness. It is first of all, because when we have done this we shall discover life itself to be bigger and more worth while than we had thought, and the moral problem will gain new light from the larger perspective; and, second, because we ourselves will be enlarged and better fitted for our moral task.

Thus it comes to pass that the artist is, as Arnold said of Emerson, the "friend and aider of him who would live in the spirit." That not every one among artists has known what the spirit in him did signify is nothing to the point. Even the prophets were in no better case. The temptation to rest in sheer enjoyment of beauty, to luxuriate in mere sensuous pleasure born of finer nerves and a more sensitive organization than one's fellows, has been the snare of the artist. It differs little, however, from the impulse which sent the most earnest spirits of the Middle Ages into the monasteries, that they might enjoy the vision of God undistracted by the sights and sounds, the needs and burdens of the workaday world. If we have learned a more excellent way of spiritual attainment through the daily service of our fellow men, let us also see the true place of art and beauty in the daily life, and obey the spirit of the Chinese proverb which says, "If you have two loaves of bread, sell one and buy lilies."

Consciousness of the besetting sin of art, and no less of their own genuine moral purpose; consciousness as well of the attitude of the practical world

## OF ARTISTS AND PHILOSOPHERS

toward art, has bred in many of the greatest artists a distrust of their calling. Plato was not the last to pride himself on being a philosopher and to seek to transcend his art. Wordsworth, as we have seen, and Browning himself, Tolstoy and Ruskin and William Morris, and a host of others have sought to prove their seriousness of temper by being reformers and metaphysicians. And the world has forgotten their philosophizings and their social programs to treasure the manifestations of their artistic power, the embodiment of their intuitions of life's beauty and significance.

This, then, is the lesson which I have learned first of all from the metaphysical poet, the high priest of the Brahmans, the master of subtleties who sought to embody German transcendentalism in incomprehensible English verse. Subtle he is, and fond of dissertation, but at such times he is by so much less an artist. If this were all, the critics would be right. But when his mind runs riot in chaotic profusion of metaphor, for sheer joy in beauty; when he flames up in a very passion of delight over the loveliness of human love and truth; when he reveals the emotion of the creative artist, not in himself alone but by intuition in the heart of the painter or the musician, of Andrea and Lippo and Abt Vogler; when the glimpses of God in the world thrill him to his soul's depths with the sense of power and majesty and infinite love, then I have learned to surrender myself to his feeling until I too have caught some glimpse of the heart

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

of fire which burns in truth and saving passion through the whole fabric of Creation. Then I feel that I have heard something of his message to his fellow men.

### II

When one has thus surrendered himself to the will of an artist, asking only that he may see what his master has seen, the first thing he learns is the worth and significance of the subject-matter. The Greek sculptors revealed the beauty of the human form. Raphael and the line of Italian artists who preceded him from Cimabue to Botticelli carried the sweetness of the doctrine of the birth of God into the heart of the world, and incidentally gave new significance to motherhood and babyhood. Rembrandt made men see the dignity of common humanity by painting Christ and the apostles in the humble garb and mien of Dutch peasants. Millet opened the eyes of the nineteenth century to the beauty of common things and the worth of common folk. So in poetry, to take a single example, Wordsworth was enamored of nature. The sounding cataract haunted him like a passion. The meanest flower that blows had power to awaken in his soul "thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears." As a result, he taught the world to find a significance in the beauties of nature which became a very revelation of God.

Browning's subject-matter, as we have seen, is

## OF ARTISTS AND PHILOSOPHERS

human life in the endless variety of its individual manifestations. In sheer intoxication with the manifold significance of human nature he crowded his verse to repletion with studies of the souls of men, finding something worthy of remark in the meanest and most sordid, and never weary of depicting the glory of human love and the beauty of the soul in action. As Angelo exhausted the possibilities of the human figure on the ceiling and reredos of the Sistine Chapel, so Browning has painted the soul in well-nigh every conceivable attitude of hope and fear, of joy and sorrow, of hate and love. The result is that when we have surrendered ourselves to his guidance and have allowed him to show us life as he saw it and loved it, in its immense complexity, its never-ending variety, its beauty of form and feature, its surprises of baseness and virtue, we find ourselves saturated with it and colored by it to a degree we had not supposed possible.

To have learned to look at the world with an artist's eyes; to become willing to enjoy beauty in painting or music or poetry as well as in nature herself simply for its own sake and for the exquisite pleasure it yields, no less than for the suggestion of spiritual significance which the perception of beauty inevitably affords—this is no small gain to any soul. But if one can go on and learn to take human life at its face value, to find joy in its manifold interest, holding the moral judgment in

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

suspense until one has, first of all, let himself go with his fellows in all their thoughtless and impulsive activities and has assured himself that he understands what they mean and purpose and how they think about themselves; if one can even restrain his sympathies until he has entered so deeply into the life of men that he is capable of something more than mere sentimental vaporings about brotherhood, and has been empowered to put his own life into theirs in a genuine incarnation of love and service; then, I maintain, one has learned the deepest lesson life has to give.

This is a matter of peculiar importance for the man who would be a spiritual teacher. It is not possible to uplift men by reaching down to them from above. One must be a part of the life he would raise to the heights: this is the meaning of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. The temptation of the moralist is to become a crusader and an iconoclast, cramming his ideals down the throats of his victims whether they will or no. The baptism of Rollo and his Northmen by wholesale and the attempt to convert the paynims by the edge of the sword, belong in the same category with the Puritan Blue Laws and the attitude of ministers to the moving-picture show. The moral interest is the deepest thing in life, but it is not the whole of life any more than the foundation is the whole of the house. This is the great gulf fixed between the artist and the reformer. If the artist has sinned through the dilettante spirit, through the

## OF ARTISTS AND PHILOSOPHERS

failure to take life seriously, the reformer has been no less sadly mistaken in not recognizing the wholesome character of normal human interests and in not waiting until he understood his neighbor before proceeding to the work of uplift. The kingdom of heaven has always suffered violence from those who would take it by force, and to whom One who played with children and was a welcome guest at wedding and feast must be a glutton and a winebibber, the friend of publicans and sinners.

Those who regard Browning as primarily a philosopher have always stumbled more or less at his universal interest in humanity. Why he should include in his gallery of men and women so wide a variety of types bad and good: Blougram and Sludge and Johannes Agricola, Porphyria's Lover and Ned Bratts and Ivan Ivanovitch, Caliban and Count Guido, the miser-girl of Pornic and the husband in "Fifine"—side by side with Caponsacchi and Pompilia and the Pope, with Gismond and Cleon and Saint John, and Karshish and Ben Ezra and Abt Vogler and the rest, has taxed the ingenuity of commentators from Mrs. Orr and Nettleship to Professor Corson. The simple fact is that all these human beings were interesting; and if we study them and what happened to them, we may gain some knowledge of the heart of man and some larger sympathy with our kind.

To do this, however, we must give the rein to our interest. We must be capable of artistic

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

sympathy. There is a legend that one day Jesus and his disciples were in the way, when they came upon the dead body of a dog by the roadside. One by one the disciples gave expression to their disgust. At length their Master said, "But behold, how white its teeth!" We must be able to find some point of contact even with a dead dog if we are to get anything out of life or learn anything from it.

This is what is popularly known as Browning's "Optimism." The word may stand for want of a better, though it smacks of a certain cheap-and-ready cockiness very far removed from the poet's robust and manly acceptance of life. Its roots lie deep in certain profound convictions of which we shall presently speak. But its primary manifestation is to be found in this universal human interest, this frank enjoyment of life, so closely akin to the artist's enjoyment of beauty. It is equally repudiated by the Puritan, to whom this world is a vale of tears, the prison-house of the soul whence it seeks escape.

The truth is that men are interesting because there is some soul of goodness, something worth while in them all. It is because there are in all men traces of spiritual dignity, the germs of spiritual development; and because, when one undertakes to depict life as he sees it, one finds these spiritual indications falling into place as the most central and essential characteristics of man-

## OF ARTISTS AND PHILOSOPHERS

kind, that the poet is able to clothe even the most sordid with some measure of dignity. They cannot avoid bearing witness to the truth even when, as in the case of Guido or the monk of the "Spanish Cloister," it is by the measure of their instinctive hostility. Ferishtah, while he refuses to dogmatize, bears this record, that

"Of absolute and irretrievable  
And all-subduing black—black's soul of black  
Beyond white's power to disintensify—  
Of that I saw no sample."

The Pope declares that outside day,

"In the absolutest drench of dark  
Ne'er wants a witness, some stray beauty-beam  
To the despair of hell."

Paracelsus finds "E'en hate is but a mask of love's," a dark saying which the poet elucidates when he describes Dante as one who

loved well because he hated,  
Hated wickedness that hinders loving.

The Bishop of St. Praxed's is at least capable, not only of the love of art and of good Latin, but of human love—the highest thing this world knows save only the love of the Divine. Blougram responds to

a sunset touch,  
A fancy from a flower-bell, some one's death,  
A chorus-ending from Euripides.

The heartless Duke of Ferrara is a lover of artistic beauty—which does not mean that the artistic



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

instinct is without moral power or spiritual worth, but, rather, that there is this much good in him at any rate. Even Guido, under the spell of extreme terror at the approach of the deathwatch, bears witness to the power of the goodness he has so long denied and scorned, when he appeals to

“Christ, Maria, God—Pompilia!  
Will you let them murder me?”

### III

All this is only to say that just as beauty bears witness to spiritual principles, to the reality and meaning of the Ideal, so the interest with which humanity is invested testifies to the ultimate worth of life. The artist, whether he knows it or not, is the minister of truth, bringing us into contact with realities to which the sluggish reason is blind, and is the revealer of God.

When we have surrendered to the spell of the artist and have seen his vision, then we are in duty bound to go on to inquire what it signifies. Merely to give ourselves up to enjoyment, without rising to self-consciousness and laying hold on the treasures of wisdom which the artist has brought, is to fall under the condemnation of the dilettante spirit which we have reprobated in the artist himself.

I make haste to insist that the true artist is, in the very nature of things, the best philosopher, whose exterior semblance doth belie his soul's

## OF ARTISTS AND PHILOSOPHERS

immensity. The recognition of the spiritual value of beauty, of the essential worth and dignity of life in itself, is the one thing that can justify art in a busy and serious world, and itself constitutes a philosophy of life.

Moreover, it rests on many other considerations, explicit and implicit, some of which I have already pointed out, and others will become manifest when I come to speak of Browning's own way of looking at things.

But one thing more remains to be said before we turn from this consideration of the artistic method and point of view. That is that by virtue of its intimate relation to life, art may become a direct means of inculcating truth. This is debatable ground, as we all know. A didactic purpose in art is like salt in food or garlic in salad—too much is disastrous. But we cannot forbid the artist to regard himself and his work seriously. If he understands himself and his art, if he has thought out its essential principles and is conscious of its spiritual implications, it is not likely that he will be any the less enamored of beauty or eager to reveal it. The greater the artist, the deeper his insight into life and its relations, the more skillful in bringing out its essential lines and awakening in us the recognition of its true proportion and values, the wider is the range of lessons he may consciously teach us.

The distinction between art that has a conscious serious purpose and is thereby rendered the loftier

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

and more enduring, and art that has been overloaded with didactic intentions and become commonplace and out of proportion, seems to rest on the distinction between essential truth and its statement in particular or dogmatic form. A cathedral may illustrate in its ornamentation the creed of its founders. A Jewish synagogue would not employ trefoil decoration, nor an English parish church cut the railing around the altar in the form of quotations from the Koran. But the trefoil may illustrate the doctrine of the Trinity, it cannot *teach* it. That a Gothic cathedral may be more impressive than a Moorish mosque does not prove the superior truth of Christianity. What the beauty of both may do is to bear witness to the spiritual aspirations of humanity, and so impress the beholder as to awaken the conviction that those aspirations must be well founded.

So "The Angelus" is fraught with spiritual meaning. True, there is beauty in its simple drawing and in the exquisite sunset light which touches every clod and blade of grass. But one has not seen "The Angelus" if he has not caught the feeling of the hour, and the sense of the dignity of common humanity which at the call of the bell from the distant tower has been rapt from its humble and drudging toil into the immediate presence of the Infinite. So essentially the meaning of the picture does this seem that one cannot avoid the conviction that this is

## OF ARTISTS AND PHILOSOPHERS

what the artist had in mind, what he purposed to teach.

One is aware of a distinction here. The purely artistic attitude would be that which, though it might not share the faith of the peasant, nevertheless recognized its beauty and sought to depict simply that; to make us feel that these humble toilers *thought* that their prayer brought them into the presence of God, and so lifted them above their drudgery. To share their faith and paint the picture in the interest of awakening the same conviction in the beholder would be quite another matter. But the point I am making is that to see the beauty of such a faith and be able to make others see it *is* to share it. Such sharing may be a temporary and purely artistic sympathy, as Booth *was* Hamlet during three hours. None the less the possibility of such identification of oneself with another bears witness to the essential truth of the other's life. Booth could not have transformed himself into Hamlet if Hamlet did not embody a genuine human experience. Millet could not have shared the faith of a peasant even by artistic sympathy were not such faith a vital power in the lives of those whom he painted. They *were* lifted above their humble lot by their prayer. That is what the artist saw and what he felt to be beautiful enough to be worth making us see. And that means a conviction of the essential truth of the peasants' faith.

*But not of its particular form.* This is what I am

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

trying to show. Nothing in "The Angelus" can prove that the Catholic dogma is truer than the Protestant faith. It can prove that prayer dignifies and ennobles life, and that the humblest peasant, with neither learning nor privilege, can share its benefits as readily as the wisest priest. The interest in the artist may have been in the dignifying of humble life rather than in the spiritual side of his truth, but the fact remains that he felt the impress of truth and employed his art to declare it.

Thus art becomes, in a still more direct and intimate way, the minister of truth. It cannot establish any particular set of dogmas, but it can so illustrate spiritual principles as to enable them to be grasped by those who would have difficulty in defining them. It remains an abiding characteristic of the human mind, as Tennyson declared, that in the deepest matters

Truth in closest words shall fail,  
When truth embodied in a tale  
Shall enter in at lowly doors.

We are all children when it comes to the greatest things, and can be instructed by object lessons when the solemn inculcation of principles glides smoothly over our heads.

It is at this point that art renders its second great service to humanity; and it is here that poetry, by reason of its greater intellectual interest, is supreme. This is what Mrs. Browning meant when she called the poets

## OF ARTISTS AND PHILOSOPHERS

The only truth-tellers now left to God,  
The only speakers of essential truth,  
Opposed to relative, comparative,  
And temporal truths; the only holders by  
His sun-skirts through conventional gray glooms;  
The only teachers who instruct mankind  
From just a shadow on a charnel-wall  
To find man's veritable stature out,  
Erect, sublime—the measure of a man,  
And that's the measure of an angel, says  
The apostle.

That Browning regarded his art in this serious fashion goes without saying. He was morally and intellectually incapable of anything less than this. I have insisted that he was, first of all, an artist because I believe that he chose that method of declaring the truth that was shut up like fire in his bones, and that by his art he would be judged; because I believe that when his readers have regarded him as a philosopher they failed to find that point of sight without which any picture becomes distorted and out of drawing. Looking for logic, they are disheartened and discouraged when they find only direct intuitive insight, and cry out that he is obscure. Looking everywhere for doctrine, they are perplexed when they frequently discover nothing but human interest and artistic skill. Lacking the true touchstone, they painfully "gather dust and chaff" and miss the true grain; they cart home loads of gravel and sand and pass by the gold.

Whether the poet first formulated a philosophy of life and then constructed his poems and invented

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

his characters to inculcate it, or whether his artistic instinct led him to find pleasure in these stories and in telling them he was led to make them the groundwork of his philosophy, is an interesting psychological inquiry, but it throws little light on his work. In any case, he undertakes to impress us with the truth through his art. Where that falls short no amount of argumentation can convince us of his doctrine. Wherein his poetry is true to life, where his men and women are vitally and eagerly alive, the truth upon which their lives and experiences rest makes its own way into our hearts.

After all (it is an old thought), literature is only life. Throbbing, eager, complex life in the world outside, passing through the prism of the poet's intense, rich, multiform personality, is spread out for us *in petto*, to be enjoyed and interpreted only by the life within ourselves, earnest and loving and openhearted. Logic makes as sad work of poetry as botany of a rose.

Our meddling intellect  
Misshapes the beauteous forms of things,  
We murder to dissect.

But if, firm in our faith that man and nature and life are not without significance, and that the primal human instincts may be provisionally trusted, we are looking abroad in the world for beauty which shall thrill us with consciousness of the ideal, for truth which shall give firm standing

## OF ARTISTS AND PHILOSOPHERS

ground for our feet amid the shock of circumstance and the rush and whirl of change, for love which shall bind us to our fellows in the deep brotherhood of common sorrows, of common joys and a common spirit of service; if we lend a willing ear to every voice which rings true, whether its speech be of things in heaven or things on the earth; if we are in search, not of arguments to bolster up our dogmas but of truth to feed our souls, then may we venture without fear to open mind and heart to those who have been called of God to See and Make-See, the master-artists of all ages and all climes and all fields, nor doubt that our life shall be enriched and made glad with the vision of unutterable things.

And when in that spirit we take up the poetry of Browning, we shall find him not the least of those who were called to be prophets of truth to this new, chaotic age in which we live; which has need to be taught that life is worth while, despite its origin; that truth is not an idle word, though its meaning has often been mistaken; and that right is not a barren survival of tribal custom, but a corner stone on which the universe must rest.



## CHAPTER III

### OF IDEAS AND FORMS

THE elder Von Moltke was said to be able to keep silent in seven languages. That certainly is a remarkable achievement, but it never captured my imagination like that other of whom I have read who could speak six languages fluently and hadn't an idea in any of them. Richard Le Gallienne has recently expressed his opinion that the literary world of to-day is in the latter case. He declares that never since men began to clothe their ideas in literary form have there been so many who have mastered the art of expression, who are able to write so cleverly, so gracefully, with such mastery of the mechanics of their art—and never have they had so little to say!

To be sure, even critics—especially when they pass forty—are likely to become mere *laudatores temporis acti*. I have recalled Mr. Le Gallienne's verdict not for the sake of expressing either agreement or disagreement; but because it suggests by way of contrast Browning's "vexed beating stuffed and stopped up brain," charged to the brim with convictions and ideals which he was straitened to deliver, forever wrestling with forms of language too clumsy and intractable to yield them utterance. One is reminded of the

## OF IDEAS AND FORMS

way in which Saint Paul tortured the flexible Greek to make it convey what eye hath not seen nor ear heard; how he piles Pelion on Ossa, adverb on adjective, inventing new forms of super-superlative to express the inexpressible. In like manner Browning struggles with our sturdy and forthright mother tongue to make it the vehicle—not so much of subtleties of thought as of feelings too delicate, of emotions too warm, of enthusiasms too eager for our “matter-molded” forms of speech.

### I

To the end of his life the art of saying directly and simply what one had to say remained a mystery to Robert Browning. He could not write a telegram without having to send a letter after it to explain what the message was about. Even Miss Barrett has to ask him to elucidate the “Sordelloisms” in his letters. When he undertakes, in “One Word More,” to put his whole soul in a sentence; when, to use his own figure, he would “steal a hair-brush, curb the liberal hand, subservient proudly, fill his lady’s missal-marge with flowerets,” the fruit of speech is so near to commonplace that his heart despairs, and he cries, “Poor the speech! be how I speak for all things!”

The source of this congenital disability is twofold. To begin with, whenever the poet undertook to speak directly and simply he found himself

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

involved in all the immense complexity and manifoldness of even the simplest fact. It is said that one of his eyes was extremely farsighted, so that he could read the time on a distant tower clock without a glass, but the other was equally nearsighted. The result seems to have been to give him both telescopic and microscopic powers, so that the simplest things appeared to him both as the center of vast forces and influences extending to the bounds of space, and equally as a microcosm of the intricate interweaving of the infinitely little. He was so made that he never saw pure white light as simply light, but as compounded of all the hues of a thousand rainbows. So modest and simple-hearted was he withal that it never occurred to him that every one else did not see it in the same radiant and glorious fashion. Add to this an altogether naïve passion for telling the exact truth, so that he would not call on his wife during the brief interval between their marriage and their final departure for the Continent simply because he would have to ask for Miss Barrett, whereas she was now Mrs. Browning, and you have one clue to his "obscurity."

The other is to be found in the intensity and impetuosity of spirit that was hidden behind his altogether mild and commonplace exterior. He was forever taking a running jump into the middle of things and then finding himself under the painful necessity of bringing up the arrears before he could go on to the end. His first letter to E. B. B.,

## OF IDEAS AND FORMS

written while as yet they were total strangers except through their poetry, begins, "I love you, dear Miss Barrett." It took him a full year to bring their intercourse up to that point again, though he nearly put the fat in the fire by another outburst after his first call—and had to lie like a gentleman (and very awkwardly withal) to square himself; which lie, after the fashion of lies, came back to torment him months afterward. He begins "Sordello" at the end and then has to employ four cantos to bring the reader up with him—with indifferent success, as Tennyson declared. He tells the story of "The Ring and The Book" three times in the first canto despite his purpose to tell it a dozen times more through different mouths.

I have often wondered what that white hot, volcanic consciousness of his must have been like, so surcharged with sentiment and passion, forever beating in vain against the prison bars of expression. He starts to say something, and before a dozen words have escaped him another and better way of putting it stumbles over the heels of the first. He begins a metaphor, and interrupts it with a simile, and that suggests an allegory, and a dozen colorful adjectives and adverbs insist on being heard, until before he gets to the end of his sentence he has shuffled and discarded enough material for a poem, besides letting two or three times as much as he needed escape simply because it was physically impossible to crowd them back into their cage.

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

In these characteristics of the man you have the secret of his involved and cumbrous sentences, his wrecked and dislocated grammar, his apparent subtleties of thought, his utter inability to speak his heart out clearly and simply. Of course it is a fault in his art, but what a glorious fault it is! One would not exchange it for all the limpid clearness and delicate melody in the world. Of course one is glad there are such poets as Keats, such painstaking craftsmen as Tennyson; but when the currents of life become clogged and sluggish and one longs for the tonic electric shock of a supercharged vitality, there is no one like Browning. When the blood grows thin and pale in the high altitudes of speculation; when life seems shallow and scanty of meaning; then a half-hour's brisk gallop on his eager Pegasus sets the pulses bounding and puts color in the cheek, and one returns with zest to the task of living.

And this is the man who looked like a French banker; who was such an indefatigable diner-out; whom Benson describes lunching with the college boys at Cambridge, jingling the coins in his pocket and putting the lads at their ease with small talk, in every way the prosperous man of the world and not at all like a poet.

In a way I think he was proud of this disguise. He refused to wear his heart on his sleeve. He would not "sonnet-sing you" about himself, nor bear his breast to the curious gaze of the mob. If Shakespeare unlocked his heart with a sonnet-

## OF IDEAS AND FORMS

key, "the less Shakespeare he." But the fact is that Browning chose the artistic method of declaring his message because it was the only one possible to him. As he said himself in the closing lines of "The Ring and The Book,"

Art remains the one way possible  
Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine at least.

It was only when he could hide behind another soul, caught in the meshes of one of life's supreme crises, and, disentangling for us the skein of impulses and emotions which made up the heart of the situation, show us the beam of life spread out in the whole spectrum of its hidden constituents, that he could declare the truth as he saw it. Then the whole matter becomes a very ostrichlike performance, after all. The hands are the hands of "Karshish, Cleon, Norbert and the fifty," but the voice is Browning's voice. Not that he makes them utter his sentiments directly—he is too much of a dramatist for that—but he leaves us in no doubt of his attitude toward the men and their ideas. He expects us to find for ourselves the sophistries of Blougram or the failure of Andrea or Cleon, but he makes it very clear that Blougram was a sophist and that the Greek poet and the Florentine painter really failed. Partly through his choice of characters, partly through the revelation involved in the situation he depicts, partly through the ring in his voice when he is speaking his own

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

convictions through their mouths, he makes through them his pronouncements upon life.

"The Ring and The Book" was intended to teach, among other things, how complex a thing any human action is, and how impossible it is for those who are in the very thick of it to tell exactly what happened, much less for anyone else to understand or tell the whole truth about it. The Pope declares that he has come at the truth by patiently sifting the evidence, gathering it bit by bit from the whole: "Truth, nowhere, lies yet everywhere in these." It is only as one senses the truth half-hidden and half-revealed by the spoken word, using the truth in his own soul as the touchstone whereby he shall recognize the truth in others, that one can arrive at a just estimate of men and their deeds.

This is in effect the key to the interpretation of all Browning's poetry. He nowhere declares himself simply and directly, but his art holds the truth everywhere in solution, whence we must gather it by a process of intuition not unlike that whereby we interpret life itself. This is, indeed, the way to reach the truth in any art.

## II

By reason of this power to find truth in solution in all human experience, to find interest and significance in even the meanest of lives, Browning will remain forever an enigma to those simple

## OF IDEAS AND FORMS

and forthright natures who see life only in two dimensions. The scientific mind, which is content with purely empirical investigation and is satisfied to regard classification as equivalent to explanation, is bound to condemn the mystical subtleties of metaphysics, and no less the luminous aura with which art clothes the bald blank surfaces of reality. The tired business man and the empirical scientist alike skate blithely over the surface of life in blissful unconsciousness of the hidden depths into which they would plunge if they should pause for an instant.

One cannot avoid a suspicion, with Le Gallienne, that the literature of the present day has fallen under the same condemnation. Life, with Nietzsche, with Gorky, with Hauptmann and Sudermann, is mere brute horror and suffering, without reason or explanation. Even the masterly art of Anatole France can give it no depth of purpose. Rolland's "Jean Christophe" is the massing together of innumerable facts, the minute details of reality, gaining dignity from sheer number and weight, but the reader must bring his own interpretation. With the British novelists life is a complex of interacting forces, interesting to unravel but with no essential meaning. "It is all triumphant art," but none the less it is art in two dimensions. It reminds one somehow of a Chinese painting, in which men and dragons, cities, mountains and sea, all lie flat against the paper, with no regard for perspective, no sense of



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

atmosphere, of the depth and fulness of reality. Maeterlinck takes refuge in a mysticism "as vague as all unsweet." Kipling alone of the more important writers of the last quarter of a century reveals a positive conviction of life's reality and significance fairly Browningsque in its intensity and moral passion. Yet the God of Kipling is strangely like a grimy Vulcan, a huge and unwashed demiurge painfully striving toward a dimly descried goal of creative purpose.

It is with a feeling of relieved hopefulness that one turns to the delicate genius of Alfred Noyes, foreseeing a not-unworthy successor, if not to Browning, at least to Tennyson as a prophet of faith and love. When Arnold Bennett comes to the last chapter in the earthly career of one of his heroines, he entitles it "The End of Sophia." Exactly so! Whether he knows it or not, Mr. Bennett has uncovered in a headline the essential nakedness of his philosophy. Life has for him no real meaning. It is as "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." To watch the antics of its puppets; to trace their rise, development, and decay through one stage after another of commonplace sordidness, until one can write, "The End of Sophia," "The End of Maria," is an interesting exercise, save that one lays down the book at the end with the weary question, "What's the use?" With what different emotions one watches Shadow-of-a-Leaf, in Noyes' "Sherwood," as, the gates of Fairyland

## OF IDEAS AND FORMS

shut to him because of his sacrificial betrayal of the secrets of the future, he goes sadly yet undaunted on his way with Blondel, Richard's minstrel, singing, "What is Death? I must ride on!"

The present is an age of disillusionment. Its young men are world-weary, too depressed even to be cynical. The sorrows of Werther were airy brightness by comparison. One by one the fond follies of former ages have been laid on the shelf—belief in God, in immortality, even in goodness. The Golden Rule is that there is no golden rule. The moral laws are but the traditions of polite society, having no sanction other than the tribunal which determines which fork to use first, or how many cards to leave for a duty call. Professor Clifford mourned, "The Great Companion is dead." The present generation has not so much as heard whether there be a Great Companion. Like Mark Twain on being told by the guide in Genoa that Columbus was dead, they politely murmur, "We didn't know he was ill."

The result is a literature marked by scientific accuracy of observation, by a knowledge of psychology at which Thackeray and even Meredith might have marveled, by a mastery of literary form beside which the works of Scott and Dickens are crude; but in which there are no great convictions, no evidences of moral passion; whose characters are commonplace, whose incidents are trivial or hopelessly tragic, whose ethics are those of the barnyard, and whose ideals rise no

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

higher than the drawing room or the market place. Small wonder that the man in the street prefers Robert W. Chambers or the moving-picture show.

From such a literature one turns with zest to the poet who sings,

Have you found your life distasteful?  
My life did, and does, smack sweet;  
Was your youth of pleasure wasteful?  
Mine I saved, and hold complete;  
Do your joys with age diminish?  
When mine fail me I'll complain;  
Must in death your daylight finish?  
My sun sets to rise again.

The thoroughgoing modernist in literature tells us that he undertakes to face life as it is, to take it at its face value, unbiased by any prejudgment as to its worth or meaning, or the place where it must come out. Unfortunately, this apparent refusal to judge is itself a judgment. One may say: "I will gather roses and skunk cabbage, daisies and dog fennel, without passing any judgment as to their relative beauty or sweetness until I have accumulated all the possible material. I will mingle diamonds and pebbles, unbiased by any dogmatic mid-Victorian, *bourgeois* prejudices." This is excellent if one is a naturalist, gathering specimens for a museum, but it will hardly do if one is a lover plucking flowers or choosing jewels for his mistress. Such a declaration is a judgment, not of nature but of men.

## OF IDEAS AND FORMS

Browning starts with the conviction that life is worth while. Whether the conviction had its roots primarily in the poet's heart or his head is a question that need not detain us. At any rate, finding men lovable and interesting he finds it easy to accept the philosophy upon which alone such loving interest in mankind can rest. The prior assumption that such a philosophy is untenable cuts the nerve of a vital human interest. The attempt to hold the judgment in suspense is evidence of unfitness to judge. The man who says he has not yet decided whether or not life is worth living or has any discoverable significance, simply bears witness to his spiritual blindness, his utter incapacity for either seeing or judging life's essential reality.

I have pleaded, it is true, for catholicity of taste, for finding pleasure in the meticulous and overwrought goldsmith's painting of Memmling as well as in Sandro's delicate line or Buonarotti's rugged modeling. By this canon one cannot deny a place among artists to such masters of form and style as I have mentioned above. They are real makers of literature, interpreters of their time, to be taken account of in the history of the human spirit. But one may enjoy the drawing and coloring of Andrea without being estopped from pointing out his spiritual weakness, or recognizing the loftier truth and deeper passion which moved the pencil of Leonardo or Rembrandt. One cannot rid oneself of the feeling that in both

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

art and literature the present age is marked by a brilliance of color and a shallowness of treatment, by an absence of sincere convictions and moral earnestness, which offers a painful contrast to the centuries immediately preceding.

In this no doubt the characteristics of the age in which we live are reflected. Some months ago I was returning from a brief Continental tour, during which I had saturated myself with the art of Rome and Florence, of the Louvre and the National Gallery. Returning, I visited the Art Museum in Boston and the Morgan Collection in New York. Passing through Chicago, I went up to the Art Institute, and found myself by chance in the midst of a multitude of worthy folk pouring tea-libations in honor of an exhibit of the local Art Society. Such a welter of vivid greens and blues and yellows, of hazy outlines and sketchy drawing I never thought to see. I thought of the horse in "Childe Roland"—"I never saw a brute I hated so!" It was all highly decorative, and here and there one came across a trace of sound sentiment, a bit of genuine artistic feeling. But I never felt so intensely the sketchiness and vivid coloring of present-day existence, with its two-rooms-and-kitchenette homes, its fifteen-cent magazines and ten-cent movies, its Coney Island mobs, its hordes of tourists, its divorce colonies, its blasé youths of seventeen—its utterly meaningless busy-ness and restless fussy chase after nothing and advance toward nowhere.

## OF IDEAS AND FORMS

To be sure, this was Chicago—what could one expect? Art? In Chicago? But it was Chicago that built the Court of Honor in 1893. And where is life more intense and modern than in Chicago? If the art I saw was not typical modern painting, where shall we look for it? At the futurist exhibit?

There is another side, no doubt. Humanity is sound at the core. There are plenty of plain folk who fear God and keep his commandments, who are busy doing the world's work and feeling their way steadily to the solution of its business and social problems, but who never get their names in the papers. And there are writers of magazine stories and newspaper poets, and young men not experienced enough to find themselves, who will yet carry the tradition of literary art to a loftier achievement than any of which the smug and complacent Victorian period ever dreamed. But for the present we are fallen on evil days and evil tongues, and we may as well acknowledge it. Perhaps the present war, with its painful revelation of the shallowness of our ideals, of the moral nakedness of our boasted modern civilization, may bear fruit in a new Renaissance of artistic and spiritual power.

### III

What is the matter with the world? What is the reason our poets and novelists have no message, our artists no feeling for form? The

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

answer simply is that they have no spiritual convictions. They have lost their faith in God, and hence of necessity in man. Like Maeterlinck's tragic folk, the priest who formerly led them is dead of old age, and they are left to wander about their desolate isle, the blind leading the blind, until death mercifully makes an end.

Life, to the thorough modern, is mere galvanism. The soul is a chemical reaction. The mind is nothing more than the succession of mental states, the stream of consciousness. God is another name for Natural Law, and Right for tribal custom. Human love is the iridescent radiance of nascent physical passion, the "Dark Flower" of man's life, to pluck which he is forever tempted to turn aside from the path marked out by the well-being of the social order. The last term in this series is reached by Nietzsche's apotheosis of self-assertion, whereby he erects a generalization of biological theory into the ultimate principle of the moral life, denying the spiritual value of love and self-sacrifice, and declaring Jesus Christ to have been the last enemy of the human race. "Had he lived to my age," wrote this disillusioned sage of thirty-seven, "he would have discarded his own doctrine."

I would be the last to deny the value of this bitter and cynical criticism of mid-Victorian tradition. The smug hypocrisy of Gladstone,

## OF IDEAS AND FORMS

who would use Parnell, sending for him to the home of Mrs. O'Shea whenever he wanted to consult with him, but was surprised and shocked forsooth to learn there had been scandal, and forthwith repudiated his quondam associate, may serve as a typical instance of the way in which men had learned to hide their heads in the sand in the presence of the ugly facts of human life. Both religion and morals had grown sadly thin and threadbare. The merciless criticism of Nietzsche and Ibsen and Anatole France tore these rags from the spiritual nakedness of the world and set men to work to weave a more enduring garment of righteousness and faith. If in the meantime society has had to content itself with fig leaves, we may endure to the end not without hope. Only let us not make the mistake of calling fig leaves cloth of gold and damask drapery, much less of wantoning *in puris naturalibus*.

The source of the thoroughgoing skepticism with regard to spiritual values so characteristic of the present day is to be found chiefly in the enormous mass of information dumped upon the human mind by the investigations of modern science. Crates and packing cases fill the hall and the parlor, crowd the piazza and overflow the front yard onto the sidewalk and out into the street. Until we can get this mass unpacked and assorted and put into place we sleep in



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

our clothes and eat canned victual off a box in the kitchen.

While the roots of modern science lie far back in the Copernican astronomy and the discoveries of Galileo and Newton, it was not until the doctrine of evolution overturned man's whole thought about himself and his relation to nature that the full force of the new scientific movement began to be felt. The world which Kant undertook to interpret did not differ materially from that which formed the subject of Aristotle's investigations or Plato's more intuitive reasoning. It was somewhat larger, but scarcely more complex. The latest thinkers stood on the shoulders of the earliest. The groundwork of the thought-life of humanity had not shifted. Small wonder that many human problems had been thought through, and poets and artists could interpret their meaning in forms of undying beauty and significance.

That world of ancient thought is gone, for better or for worse. Whether we like it or not, it has all been cast into the melting pot, and the thinker of to-day must sit as the refiner of silver. None of the pure metal will in the end be lost, and much dross will be cast out. When the whole is recast in new forms there is no doubt they will be other and better than those our fathers have known.

More exact information has been brought to light in the past fifty years than in the pre-

## OF IDEAS AND FORMS

ceding fifty centuries. An encyclopædia five years old is worthless; one fifty years old is a curiosity. The first effect of all this is to stagger the imagination and paralyze the reason. Faith is really no more difficult to-day than it was in the fifteenth century. It is no more unreasonable to believe in a God big enough to run the universe of modern science than it was to believe in a smaller God for the Ptolemaic system. It is altogether a matter of the imagination, not of the logical intellect. The mind has simply been clogged by the mass of undigested information. Darwin, for example, saw as clearly as anybody the enormous enlargement of the doctrine of final cause brought about by the evolutionary hypothesis. He declared that the testimony of evolution to the Divine Intelligence infinitely surpassed that of Paley's curious coincidences. But he added (I quote from memory), "When I consider that my own mind is the mere product of evolution from the instinct of the lower orders of animal life, I question my right to make so stupendous a generalization." It never occurred to him that it was the same mind which had first made the equally stupendous generalization that it was so descended; that if it were competent for the one, it was equally so for the other. But one was made, naturally, before the far-reaching results which flow from it could be evident; which results, when once they had presented themselves to the imagina-

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

tion, made further reasoning for the time being impossible. In like manner John Burroughs has somewhere said that it was easy enough to believe in God when the stars were mere points of light and the sun revolved around the earth; but that he could not look up to the immensities of space revealed by the telescope and the spectroscope and maintain his belief in a Providence which looks after the individual life. Once more it is the imagination that is overcome and which paralyzes the logical faculty.

The interesting thing is that it should always be the religious, not the scientific reason, which is disabled. Darwin accepted the conclusions of his reason regarding its pithecoïd ancestry, but declined to accept the further implication of the Divine Intelligence. In the same way Herbert Spencer's *First Principles* cut the ground from under scientific no less than religious knowledge; but he and his disciples proceeded to apply his principles to religious matters and utterly to ignore them in scientific discussions. It is this peculiar twist in human nature that makes one long to believe in a personal devil.

The deeper thinking of our own time has already transcended the narrow limitations of nineteenth-century scientific thought, and recognizes the validity of the spiritual evaluation of existence. But it takes a considerable time for the conclusions of science and philosophy to percolate down to the common consciousness of

## OF IDEAS AND FORMS

mankind. Moreover, knowledge must needs be thoroughly assimilated, as clay must be thoroughly tempered, before it becomes sufficiently plastic to be used for artistic purposes.

For this reason the literary art of our day has not yet emerged from the immediate influence of Darwin and Spencer and Haeckel. It is still clogged and hampered by the undigested mass of information which science has placed at its disposal. Finding this material too vast and complex to be stowed away in the little pigeonholes of traditional dogma, our novelists and playwrights have broken these up to make room for something new and larger in the way of a filing cabinet—something elastic and readily revised, like a sectional bookcase or a loose-leaf encyclopædia. What they have failed to see is that, after all, the new material really is intended to serve the same purpose as the old, and that it is made up of pretty much the same sort of stuff, so that the old classifications will serve.

To get away from the figure, the modern man has not yet come to see that life has not changed a whit in its essential needs and appetites; that men still live by food, still work and play and sleep and procreate their kind in exactly the same fashion as they did in the days of old Rameses; and that by the same token the lessons of life and its meaning which humanity has so painfully acquired through the long years are valid for the twentieth century.

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

The conclusions of the older world regarding the essential truth of things rested in reality on something more than scientific induction. They were, in effect, an evaluation of life, and while they will no doubt be modified as the result of our deeper investigations, they will be found in the end to be more firmly established than ever. In the meantime they may well be taken as at least working principles, as the tentative basis for the arrangement and interpretation of our new material. The house—to go back to our original figure—is, after all, our ancestral mansion into which we are to put all this new furniture which so clogs the passageways and brings disorder into our life. Perhaps when we get to it we shall have to enlarge our dwelling, put some rooms to new uses, tear down certain partitions, cut new windows and doors; and as a result we hope to find our life, in some new age not too far off, at once simpler and more commodiously satisfying; but we need not burn the house down after all.

### IV

It is the distinction of Browning that, coming at the end of the former age and accepting its fundamental traditions, he finds their justification in life itself, in its manifold beauty and interest. He shared the revolt which ushered in the nineteenth century. He felt the impulse

## OF IDEAS AND FORMS

of the romantic movement. His earliest poetical writings—happily suppressed—were Byronesque. His hero was Shelley. For a time he was, as Mrs. Orr tells us, “a professing atheist and practicing vegetarian.” When asked by some one if he were a Christian, he is said to have repelled the suggestion with an energetic “God forbid!” Nevertheless, he not only remained, as Chesterton declares and Havelock Ellis echoes, essentially mid-Victorian in his instinctive moral reactions, but, carried by his art into a direct study of life itself, of the needs and passions of the human individual, his conviction that, in spite of everything, life is worth living, drove him back upon fundamental Christianity.

This phase of his teaching remains for further consideration. What I want to reiterate at this point is that it was the artist in him which led him to the truth, as it was the truth which in turn reacted upon his art to give it dignity and power, which makes it so inspiriting, so spiritually satisfying. His “optimism” is at bottom the artist’s joy in life. But he cannot maintain that interest without finding himself driven to justify it by convincing his readers that life is worth while, and interesting because it is worth while. It is here that the literature of the present day fails. Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells cannot maintain their enthusiasm for reform, because they have no real faith in their fellows, and hence none in any social order they may establish.

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

Galsworthy and Arnold Bennett and Edith Wharton try to dispense with the question as to life's worth and meaning, with the result that they no longer find it particularly interesting. They can only attract attention by sheer force of self-assertion, or take refuge in a mysticism which leaves one in doubt whether it may prove to be the mist of the morning, or only the twilight of the gods, the precursor of ultimate chaos. At any rate, at present it satisfies only those whose souls are equally immersed in fog.

That Browning felt the darkening of the sun no one who reads him thoughtfully can doubt. He seemed for a time a stronghold for those whom Professor James called the "tender-minded," who sought to bolster up their faith in the midst of the growing doubt and darkness of the world—hence the Browning Society and the earnestness of the women's clubs. Indeed, for years he was regarded as the protagonist of "advanced thought," and furnished texts for "liberal" sermons by preachers who found the Bible old-fashioned. At present I fear he is to many but a stranded derelict, whose art was so clouded and distorted by his hopelessly mid-Victorian philosophy that both must presently be cast out and trodden under foot of men. Nevertheless one wonders if, after all, it may not be that his passionate conviction of the worth of life and the significance of human destiny shall prove the starting point for a more courageous literary

## OF IDEAS AND FORMS

art which will some day emerge from the present  
flux of human faiths and ideals for the guidance  
of the new age which is to be.

My own hope is, a sun will pierce  
The thickest cloud earth ever stretched;  
That after last returns the first,  
Though a wide compass round be fetched;  
That what began best can't end worst,  
Nor what God blest once prove accurst.  
("Apparent Failure.")



## CHAPTER IV

### OF ORTHODOXY AND THE THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

CHESTERTON tells us that he set out, in common with all the other solemn little boys of his age, to be in advance of his time, and to propound a new heresy which should be more progressive than them all. When he had put the finishing touches to it he discovered to his astonishment that it was orthodoxy. In other words, when he seriously asked the new science and philosophy what life demands to make it worth living, he found that they had no answer; and when, availing himself of so much of their teaching as seemed to bear on the matter, he sought to answer his own question, he found he had been anticipated in this answer some nineteen hundred years. Of course this discovery brought him into direct conflict with some of the pet notions of his contemporaries, and he has given great offense by the cavalier fashion in which he has treated the solemn pretensions of the high priests of the new age. He has been regarded as a sort of *enfant terrible*, who asks all manner of embarrassing questions and reveals family secrets in the most disconcerting way; and who, but for the restraints of good form

## OF ORTHODOXY

and the presence of company, would be sent supperless to bed. One has yet to read any serious and sufficient answer, however, to his comments on modern thought.

It was doubtless this experience in the search for satisfying answers to the questions of the human spirit which made Chesterton so discerning and sympathetic a commentator on Browning. For the poet himself passed through much the same movement of thought. As we have seen, he shared the spirit of revolt with which the nineteenth century began. The present is not the first age which has paid tribute to the scientific spirit or has questioned the teachings of the fathers. The classicism which was displaced by the romantic movement in literature and art during the first quarter of the nineteenth century was quite as smugly superficial as the mid-Victorian period, and was as energetically repudiated by the generation which succeeded. Our young men shrug their shoulders at any idea older than Darwin; the French Revolution abolished the calendar and decreed that 1793 should be the Year One.

### I

No youth of sensitive soul, least of all a poet, could escape the influence of such a period. Byron was fairly Nietzschean in the abandon with which he asserted himself and his right to obey his impulses no matter what lesser beings

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

suffered thereby. Shelley's attitude toward marriage must have satisfied the ideas of Inez Milholland or Elinor Glyn. It is not to be wondered at that the young Browning, that slender youth with clustering curls and lemon-colored gloves whom Mrs. Orr describes, who was given to flinging out of his Camberwell home at night to follow the camp fires of gypsies, who lived for two years on bread and potatoes, who made his first trip to the Mediterranean the sole passenger on a small sailing vessel, making friends with the rough crew; this son of a middleclass English home whose soul was always too big for his body, and who lived, beneath so commonplace an exterior, such a volcanic inner life as I have sought to describe—that such a youth should have been a passionate admirer of Shelley, and professed himself a freethinker and an atheist.

But Browning was a greater poet than Byron or Shelley. His soul was tuned to vaster harmonies. He touched life at more points. His nature was sounder and more wholesome. His intense sympathy for the human spirit in its inner struggles and aspirations enabled him to extend a juster valuation to its external conditions. Byron, with all his genius, was a spoiled child, selfish and vain, whose shallow cynicism was little more than the rage of such a youth at a world which will not lend itself to his whims. Shelley's infinitely finer nature was equally ill

## OF ORTHODOXY

adapted to do battle with the workaday world, whose prejudices he could never understand, whose conventional laws seemed to him utterly stupid, the inexorable conditions of life in which stirred him to strenuous but ineffectual revolt. Browning's saner spirit, equally conscious of the shallowness of conventional morality and the stupidity of social rules, nevertheless felt beneath the traditions of the world the instinctive workings of the moral consciousness and recognized in them the necessary conditions of life in a social order. Less absorbed in himself, in his own desires and emotions, yet impelled by the intense individualism of his nature to find in the soul-life of the individual the chief end and purpose of human existence, he escaped, on the one hand, the lawless selfishness of Byron and, on the other, the equally lawless social anarchy of Shelley. Life to him was full of meaning. The conditions with which any man found himself surrounded were, after all, but a "stuff to try the soul's strength on," and were of infinitely less importance than the manner in which he conducted himself under all conditions. Accordingly, he wasted no time either in morbid self-pity or in wild revolt, but set himself directly to the task of understanding life as he found it and asking himself how a man should set about to get the most out of it.

The path thus chosen led him inevitably to the spiritual problems which underlie all human

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

existence. He was concerned not with causes but with purposes, not with explanations and classifications but with evaluations. The artist-soul in him found life full of beauty, but he found it full of conflict and contradiction withal. He could no more describe the joys and sorrows, the sins and struggles of men and women without asking what all these things mean than Turner could paint a sunset without analyzing its colors into their primary tints, that he might choose what pigments would reproduce them.

But when he undertook to find an answer to these questionings the poet was led straight to essential Christianity. The God whom he thought he had discarded became the only sure foundation for life. The Christ whom the churches so feebly represented became the supreme guaranty for the primal Love, without which no meaning or purpose to human existence can be found. The moral conventions which the British public obeyed in such narrow and superficial fashion became the ultimate bases of the social order. The orthodox notion of life as a "probation," where the soul's choice is made between heaven and hell, became an interpretation of the hardships and struggles whereby men and women learn the lessons of this primary school and are fitted for graduation into the larger life beyond, while the crude pictures of a future state painted by the preachers became the broad opportunity of an immortal destiny which alone can give

## OF ORTHODOXY

meaning to the brief and fragmentary existence of the earthly years.

The moderns have discovered that, with all his apparent breadth of sympathy and unconventional ethical interest, Browning remained mid-Victorian in his instinctive moral reactions. To be sure! It was this frank acceptance of the main outlines of an interpretation of life which set him free to work out its deeper meaning. The poets of revolt were so absorbed in their own emotions or in fulminating their bolts against the abuses of the social order that they had no time left to ask what it was all about or upon what conditions a worth-while soul-life is possible. The moderns are equally self-absorbed. When they turn from themselves and their hysterical demand for "self-assertion" they become pure empiricists, disinterested collators of unrelated "facts," to ask the meaning of which were an impertinence. Browning took the moral framework for granted and turned his attention to life itself; not as a museum of dried and mounted specimens to be catalogued, but as a world of eager and absorbing interest in which everything bore some relation to everything else, and whose manifoldness and complexity cried aloud some great soul-stirring message, could one but interpret its meaning. "To find that meaning was his meat and drink." And when he sought the key he found it in the essential teachings of that faith which was so crudely and

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

imperfectly held by the world about him, that Christianity which the Revolution had "bowed out with thanks for its provisional services."

### II

In this the poet has given double offense: he has accepted the ancient traditions of religion, and he has gone behind the empirical facts to their essential meaning. This is being tender-minded indeed! It is to be both orthodox and a metaphysician. Of a truth this man was no thinker!

Thus it appears that the suggestion that Browning was primarily a poet rather than a philosopher is one which may cut both ways. It has been adopted with suspicious alacrity by those who think thereby to discount his influence in the world of thought. I read a vigorous editorial in a Sunday paper the other day to the effect that while it must be admitted that Browning at times displays genuine poetic feeling, as a thinker he ranks far below Wordsworth or Shelley; he was, in fact, the peddler of a vague German transcendentalism long since cast on the rubbish heap. When his verse is real poetry it is not without merit, but as for his philosophy, pouf!

I shall not discuss at this point either the soundness of Browning's philosophy or its relation to German transcendentalism; but I venture

## OF ORTHODOXY

to suggest that the fact that his fundamental conceptions of life rest on poetic insight rather than on logical acumen does not necessarily discredit them. The critic should reread his Hazlitt and his Emerson. Doubtless a poet, in certain moods, is but the weaver of entrancing fancies, giving "to airy nothings a local habitation and a name"; but in other moods he becomes the organ of direct spiritual vision, declaring the things which must be true whether logic has arrived or is capable of arriving at them or not.

A good many years ago, in a Western State, a sensible old farmer was elected to a quasi-judicial office. He went to a friend who was a jurist of experience and asked for some suggestions as to the discharge of his new duties. "When any matter is brought before you," said the judge, "give your decision, but don't give your reasons for it. The chances are your decision will be right, but your reasons will be wrong." Of course what he meant was that the old man's judgment would be based on the direct working of his common sense in the light of his long experience of life, while his scanty knowledge of law and his lack of judicial training would render his legal reasoning highly amateurish and uncertain.

It does not require an extended acquaintance with theological and devotional literature to find in it a wide commentary on this principle. The scholastic philosophy which afforded the frame-



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

work for the Divine Comedy has passed away with the Ptolemaic astronomy, but that does not hinder modern readers from finding immense spiritual value in the study of Dante. George Eliot was a devoted reader of Thomas à Kempis. The two had little in common on the basis of theological theory, but the hungry heart of a great woman found much spiritual food in the insight of the mediæval mystic. The modern world has discarded most of John Bunyan's doctrines, but who has not been both charmed and uplifted by *Pilgrim's Progress*? Life makes its own impress on the soul of a deeply spiritual man, and when he declares the lessons he has learned they are valid for all time, whether one can accept his logical and theological framework or not.

But this is not all of the matter. When our farmer friend had rendered his decisions his legal adviser might have analyzed them and have shown the principles of jurisprudence on which they were really based. If, then, the decisions were indeed just, they would bear convincing witness to the soundness of the implicit legal doctrine. The same is true in literature. The formal dogmas of à Kempis or Bunyan may or may not be important, but their spiritual judgment of life was sound, as their power over men in succeeding generations testifies. If, then, it can be shown that this rested on certain fundamental convictions regarding life and its founda-

## OF ORTHODOXY

tions without which no such judgment could be passed, we have the strongest possible testimony to the abiding worth and the essential truth of that fundamental intellectual basis. Whether life rests at bottom on a material or a spiritual foundation is an intellectual question, a matter of philosophical or theological interpretation. If it can be shown that on a materialistic basis spiritual life is impossible and spiritual values meaningless, and if, nevertheless, the character and work of those who have seen most deeply into life is such as to convince us of the abiding worth of spiritual things, this becomes the highest possible witness to the truth of the spiritual philosophy. If logic cannot lead us beyond the material, so much the worse for logic. It is not the spiritual universe which is discredited thereby, but the logical instrument wherewith we have sought to grasp reality.

This is the essential meaning of Bergson's philosophy. In setting up intuition as the instrument of ultimate truth he does not discredit logic in its own field of formal science. He merely points out that the logical reason can never get beyond the cinematographic reproduction of reality, it can never give us reality itself. This comes to us, if at all, only through the direct grasp of life upon life which we call intuition. A hotel in a Western city created Homeric merriment a few months ago when it wrote letters to all the actors named in a much-advertised

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

theatrical production inviting them to make its hostelry their headquarters during their stay in the city, only to discover after the letters had been sent that the performance was a moving-picture show! The actors had disappeared between the films—nothing came to town but the appearance of reality. The criticism of Kant, no less than that of Herbert Spencer, long ago showed that logic can never get us any further than such a lifeless reproduction of reality. Men live and life goes forward not by the logical but by the practical reason, which is nothing, after all, but the frank acceptance of intuition. Achilles overtakes the tortoise, Diogenes walks about. So friendship and patriotism and love and religious faith maintain themselves in experience and approve their right and worth to the heart of man despite the limitations of his logical faculty. In like manner flowers somehow escape botany, as life eludes the surgeon's scalpel. Logic can analyze and science record the bare superficial facts, as that water turns to ice at one temperature and to steam at another, or that Columbus discovered America in 1492, or that the invention of gunpowder hastened the overthrow of feudalism. But the human values of these facts, the emotions and purposes that grow out of them or have been put into them, can be given us only by the poet and the artist. Apart from these human and spiritual values the facts are as barren and useless as desert sand,

## OF ORTHODOXY

and the bare cataloguing of them an occupation as significant as playing with spools in a home for the feeble-minded. Science is of use to the world only in so far as it becomes a vehicle for the enrichment of life, for the heightening of human values; and this larger enterprise waits upon the spiritual evaluation of reality which the intuition alone can render. If in the progress of this discovery and interpretation of human values certain fundamental ways of looking at life are brought to light which alone can give meaning to the events and experiences which science records, the logical reason has nothing to say further than to take these also into account as material for interpretation and to incorporate them into our total view of reality. Their validity rests not on logic but on life.

This is likewise the essential meaning of pragmatism. Doubtless the pragmatists have conceded too much when they have tried to do without the concept of truth altogether, and to content themselves with the moving film which looks like life. But what they have meant to say is that the mental and spiritual life exist in their own right and are entitled to whatever they need in the world; that what we mean when we say that anything is true is that it ministers to such a need, and conversely, that anything which so ministers is entitled to be regarded as true. To a mere layman it would seem that in order to

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

make their principle broad enough to cover all human experience the pragmatists will have to include virtually the very demands of reason they have discarded; that they will have to take into account both the moving film and the life-movement which it records, and that provision must, after all, be made at some hostelry for the flesh-and-blood actors themselves. Bergson seems to have come nearer to a sound statement of the principle they were "ettling after," as the Scotch say, than the pragmatists themselves; but the pragmatist criticism has been immensely useful in setting us free from the idols of the den which threatened to deprive the soul of its rights in a world so much bigger than logic as this world in which we live. The significance of pragmatism for the common life is this, that it enlarges our conception of truth and gives us courage to accept the validity of many things which we need for our happiness, as Tytl needed the Blue Bird, but which could never be confined within the bars of our logical cage. It sets us free to trust our intuitions, to accept those immediate convictions of truth which reason often seems to discredit; which at best it can only confirm but never originate.

If certain ways of thinking about life have proved useful to the progress of the race, if they make life more worth living, if they have power to lift men out of the sordidness of material aims and to make them more truly and greatly men,

## OF ORTHODOXY

then these ways of thinking stand in their own right, and anything in the teachings of science and philosophy which seems to oppose them must be discredited as at best but partial and half-understood truth.

These spiritual convictions may in their turn have been imperfectly understood and wrongly applied. There is nothing in this line of reasoning which can properly be held to establish any particular set of dogmas; to decide, for example, between transubstantiation and consubstantiation, or between supra- and infralapsarianism. But it can and does bear witness to the creative principles which the particular dogmas were attempts to express and which must be taken into account in any thoroughgoing interpretation of human experience.

It is at this point that art in general and poetry in particular becomes the handmaid of spiritual truth.

. . . Ay, and while your common men  
Lay telegraphs, gauge railroads, reign, reap, dine,  
And dust the flaunty carpets of the world  
For kings to walk on, or our president,  
The poet suddenly will catch them up  
With his voice like a thunder—"This is soul,  
This is life, this word is being said in heaven,  
Here's God down on us! what are you about?"  
How all those workers start amid their work,  
Look round, look up, and feel, a moment's space,  
That carpet-dusting, though a pretty trade,  
Is not the imperative labor after all!

(Mrs. Browning, "Aurora Leigh.")

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

### III

It is noteworthy that when Browning does undertake to formulate a philosophy he anticipates the attempt of pragmatism to discount philosophical scepticism at the counter of the practical reason. The poet has given much offense by declaring the impossibility of knowledge and attempting to substitute love therefor. Professor Lockwood devotes the most important chapter in his little book on Browning as a Religious Teacher to a critique of the poet's reasoning at this point. I have already confessed that his attempt to find philosophical justification for his views of life leaves much to be desired; but what Professor Lockwood fails to see is that Browning was a pragmatist born out of due time, before James and Bergson had made clear the antinomy which lies at the heart of all logical reasoning, and had justified intuition as an organ of real knowledge.

What Browning felt, what all poets and prophets have felt, was the profound limitations of the scientific method, with its moving-picture reproduction of life masquerading as life itself. Browning proclaimed his right to feel his way into the heart of life. He insisted that love has its own organs of knowledge, which function when the reason is powerless; that the honest heart can find in itself the clew of life's maze, while the heart which is blinded by its own moral weakness

## OF ORTHODOXY

is bound to go wrong in spite of the best guides which knowledge and culture can afford. It was the same truth which Tennyson felt no less strongly:

A warmth within the breast would melt  
The freezing reason's colder part,  
And like a man in wrath the heart  
Stood up and answered, "I have felt!"

Browning was himself a splendid illustration of his own philosophy, in that his logical reason tends forever to lead him into the mists of speculation or the hair-splitting subtleties of casuistry, but when he gives the rein to his spiritual intuition he discovers for us a wealth of truth which will forever enrich humanity and remain a helpful guide to the interpretation of experience.

Thus, while maintaining my thesis that Browning was primarily a poet rather than a philosopher, I am impelled to take back with the left hand what I gave at the beginning with the right, in that I have disclaimed the central importance of his "teaching," urging, rather, the artistic beauty and power of his poetry, its unrivaled human interest, its marvelous portrayal of life in its variety and complexity, its dignity and worth, bidding the reader give himself up to the spell of the artist and take no thought for his philosophy; now, I make bold to declare that it is his spiritual insight which is the supreme contribution of his poetry to the life of men.



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

The mistake men have made is in looking for this insight in the arguments of the philosopher rather than in the art of the poet. Their instinct was sound when they felt him to be a great teacher, their error was in undertaking to divorce his teaching from his art. It is his spiritual insight which they have acknowledged when they have talked about his philosophy. This is what I myself found in him in those early days of my enthusiastic discipleship, before the recognition of his artistic power awakened me from my "dogmatic slumber." It is this to which I come back after having gained the broader vision of life which the artist's universal sympathy and deep, spontaneous gladness have created in my soul. The jewel has gained new beauty from its setting, the spiritual truth new significance from the broader human interest out of which it grows.

What I have learned and what I desire to teach others is that not only are we compelled to find the meaning of Browning's poetry, not in any simple and forthright statement of truth in which the poet has summed up his intellectual convictions, but, rather, by absorbing truths which are held in solution throughout the whole of his work; but the process by which the poet himself came into possession of the truth is not other than this. He gathers it out of life itself; not by logical, which is akin to chemical, analysis, a process whereby one element after another is isolated and identified, but, rather, by synthesis,

## OF ORTHODOXY

by a sympathetic identification of himself with his fellows until he has somehow gathered up into his own experience all that life could teach him, whence he distills it for us in the alembic of his artistic genius. He nowhere gives us

pure, crude fact,  
Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard  
And brains high-blooded ticked.

Rather he everywhere fuses his own soul with that crude inert stuff, whereby he rounds it into a ring-thing fit to wear. And when it is done and a spurt of the proper fiery acid of criticism o'er its face removes all trace of alloy, we have indeed pure virgin gold; not of mere fact but of essential spiritual truth whereby we are brought into a deeper understanding of our own life, its hopes and fears, its meaning and its destiny.

"The Ring and The Book," from which I have just quoted, serves at once as the completest embodiment of the poet's ripe thought and the most perfect example of his method of arriving at truth. I mentioned the poem to a youthful literary friend the other evening. "Oh," he said, "you must admit that it is frightfully long-winded." The Sunday editorial to which I referred a moment ago declared it "frankly a bore." The learned editor of a certain many-volumed encyclopædia of universal literature, for which I paid two dollars per month for an oppres-

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

sively long season, dismissed it with the remark that the poem is "twenty-two thousand lines long, all about a Roman murder trial." But I think of the arid stretches which lay an unbearable burden on the soul of the determined reader who will wade through all the second part of "Faust"; no man has ever, unless he were a German critic, read the entire second part of "Don Quixote"; six books of the "Iliad" are regarded as sufficient for the cultural needs of the average youth, and I have myself never been able to force my weary mind through the theological discussions of the "Paradiso." Remembering these things, I turn with delight to the judgment of Chesterton, who declared "The Ring and The Book" an epic worthy of a place beside the classical masterpieces of poetic genius. These were written, he says, for an age when men fought with dragons; Browning wrote for an age which fights with microbes. "The Ring and The Book" is a microscopic study of the significance of the infinitely little. The poet shows us truth pieced together in tiny fragments, like a thirteenth-century stained-glass window. He will find for us moral heroism and spiritual grandeur amid the dust heap and ash bin of life. So he rescues this forgotten woe out of the accumulated rubbish so vividly described in the Square of San Lorenzo, this sordid police-court record lost for centuries amid the greater crimes which displaced it in the world's gossip, and by it proves

## OF ORTHODOXY

Our human speech is nought,  
Our human testimony false, our fame  
And human estimation words and wind.

The pure in heart find in themselves the torch whereby they walk in a plain path while others wander in endless mazes lost. Shallow self-interest and idle gossip-mongering remain blind and unknowing even when the pure gold of truth lies patent before their eyes. The pampered servants of church and state prove dull-witted and slow of heart in the crisis, while child-wife and soldier-priest leap headlong to the heart of reality. They pierce through the tissue of lies wherewith they are surrounded and lay hold unerringly on essential truth, both in each other and in the demands of the situation. The plants "imbedded yonder south, to mellow in the morning, made fat by the master's eye," yield such timid leaf. The one blossom which glads the heart of the Pope-gardener, his "rose he gathers for the breast of God," is but a "chance-sown, cleft-nursed seed," "born mid the briers of his inclosure." The plainest principles of right and justice lose their power when committed to the guardianship of logical systems and authoritative dogmas, only to spring forth in pristine splendor in the heart and mind made sensitive by loyalty and obedience,

authentic to the experienced ear  
O' the good and faithful servant.

In a word, goodness and truth are in this

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

world forever inextricably intermingled with the evil and the false, the sordid and the commonplace. They are to be discovered and disentangled, not by learning or skill in dialectic, not by scientific investigation or philosophical argument, but by direct spiritual insight—a faculty whose effectiveness is directly proportioned to the purity and loyalty of the soul. These are the things which are hid from the wise and prudent and revealed unto babes. The pure in heart see God, and they that do hunger and thirst after righteousness walk unperplexed in that path which shineth more and more unto the perfect day.

Of course "The Ring and The Book" means much more than this. It is a cross-section of life itself, wherein we may find glimpses of almost every phase of human experience, traces of every variety of truth. I know of no other writing of modern times which contains so much ripe observation of life, so much wise understanding of the human heart. As Goethe put the distilled wisdom of a lifetime into the second part of "Faust," so Browning has poured into this vessel red wine of a mighty pulse trodden out of the very heart of life. To find only one meaning, or even one chief meaning, in such a poem is akin to the attempt so often made to interpret human history upon a single principle, like the influence of climate or the working of economic interest. The very complexity of the poem

## OF ORTHODOXY

itself, in its plan and structure, ought to be sufficient warning against such an attempt. The sordidness of greed, the strength of "the terrible meek," the significance of "life's terrible choice," the virtue of tolerance, the sweetness of true womanhood and the elements of the strongest and most virile manliness—these and many other things are taught in the poem, up to the Pope's analysis of the problem of doubt, the defense of Christianity and the significance of faith. Herein appears the futility of such a suggestion as I recently came across, that Browning's mid-Victorian middle-class conscience could not recover its equanimity after so fearful a breach of the conventions as his elopement with E. B. B., and the poem was written to justify such an occasional defiance of Mrs. Grundy! Such critical bosh inclines one to believe not only in a personal devil but in a literal Inferno for critics.

The theory of knowledge which the poet thus expounded in the greatest and ripest of his writings does not differ essentially from the philosophy set forth in his youth in "Paracelsus." The arch-quack of the sixteenth century, whose name, Bombastus, has been perpetuated in the word which describes his most glaring characteristic, was chosen by Browning to embody the passion for pure science, for the absolute intellectual mastery of life. It was impossible for Browning not to make him human and lovable, but he

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

does not disguise his intellectual arrogance, his contempt for humanity, and his resulting failure to grasp essential truth. The quiet Festus, the gentle Michal, are infinitely nearer to the real secret of life than the tempestuous genius whose eager intellect wears out his body in the vain attempt to master life through knowledge. Aprile the poet fails equally and for the opposite reason. He has tried to stretch mere sentiment into a garment vast enough to clothe creation. The unloveliness of things—and folks—which stirs Paracelsus to rage and scorn drives the weaker nature of the poet to madness. Even love, apart from intellectual grasp and practical effort to serve humanity, fails to attain to the true secret of life; yet Paracelsus has somewhat to learn from Aprile. None the less he continues to fail when he undertakes to put his learning to the service of his fellows, because he still despises them. He has not yet become one with them. He attempts to reach down to them from his lofty height instead of stooping to share their weakness and failure, and hence he still must fail. Truth is attained only as one learns to become one with all his fellow men in their struggle and loss and sin, until, through the common experience of life, he arrives at the deep wisdom of sympathy and love.

There is something Paracelsus-like in the Bombastus of the modern world, Nietzsche, with his immense scorn of all that mankind has

## OF ORTHODOXY

held sacred, his foreshadowing of the superman, who by the sheer force of his will-to-power shall bend the universe to his own ends. Not otherwise did Paracelsus shut his ears to the pleadings of Michal, to match his will against the powers of destiny. In Nietzsche's case it was Paracelsus who was driven mad; and the age which lent its ears to his demand for self-assertion seems likely to beat its head against the bars of the moral imperative until it shall learn again the divine folly of love and sacrifice.

### IV

With this recognition of a knowledge of life to be attained through love, of the intuition of the soul as affording an organ for the interpretation of reality, we are, with Bishop Blougram, back on Christian ground. For this is in effect nothing less than religion's appeal to faith.

Faith has been variously defined as "believing what one knows isn't so"; as "*credo quia impossibile*"; as uncritical credulity, an attitude of mind which accepts equally fairies and angels, mediæval miracles and the wonder-stories of the Gospels; as unquestioning obedience to ecclesiastical authority, the devout acceptance of the creed, reliance upon the infallibility of the Scriptures, and so on.

As a matter of fact, faith is none of these



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

things. Faith may exist in company with superstitious credulity, or it may be as keenly critical as the most empirical of sciences. It may render submission to the church, or it may cast itself boldly on the spiritual judgment of the humblest individual.

For faith, at bottom, is nothing in the world but the recognition of a realm of truth which transcends both sense-perception and the logical reason. It regards the normal demands of life, soul and body, as checks drawn on the Bank of Reality, whose assets are the universe; and it presents them forthwith for payment, refusing to believe that God is bankrupt.

That there is an element of faith in the operations of the mind itself a little reflection shows. The science of Haeckel, the philosophy of Spencer, are at bottom as mystical as the piety of Thomas à Kempis. The only real difference between them is with regard to the boundaries of this realm which is reached through intuition. Haeckel would establish the frontier to include the knowability of the material universe—its conformity to the laws of thought, the axioms of mathematics and the presuppositions of physical science. He would exclude the abstractions of metaphysics. Spencer would include the latter, but would draw the line at the spiritual longings of the human heart. Religion simply extends the boundary to the uttermost limits of Reality, and claims the right of the human spirit to hold the

## OF ORTHODOXY

whole realm of Existence in fief to the Father of Spirits.

Even Chesterton has not always thought clearly at this point. He seems to confuse faith with the acceptance of authority. He reverses Blougram's reasoning. The Bishop defended his adherence to the Catholic tradition on the ground that if one begins to examine and question, there is no telling where to stop:

Cut the Naples liquefaction—what comes last  
But Fichte's clever cut at God himself?

Chesterton says: "The church has shown me the meaning of the highest spiritual realities; perhaps I had better accept all her lesser doctrines as well. She has taught me to believe in God, therefore I believe in ghosts and fairies."

This is to confuse the whole problem by standing the pyramid upon its apex. Of course, if belief in God depends on nothing but the authority of the church, then to question that authority in the least things is to undermine it in the greatest. But if, as it may be, we accept the teaching of the church regarding God because that satisfies our spiritual hunger, it but clouds the issue to lug in the discussion of lesser matters which have not the force of this direct spiritual appeal. Of a truth, belief in fairies is not essential to belief in God—why then discuss fairies? Since many men have actually accepted the spiritual teachings of Christianity without

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

acknowledging the authority of the church, why insist that there may possibly be something in the Naples liquefaction or the celibacy of the clergy? Granted the possibility, it but darkens counsel to introduce debatable minutiae of doctrine in a discussion of fundamental questions. Suppose the church to have been wrong in a thousand particulars; cut the fairies and the doctrine of transubstantiation, the celibacy of the clergy and the infallibility of the Pope if you like; cut even the historical accuracy of the New Testament records or the ultimate validity of Saint Paul's interpretation of the crucifixion of Jesus; still the fundamental historicity of the Gospels, the spiritual significance of the character of Christ, the essential truth of his religious and ethical teachings have not been touched—much less the still deeper question of the spiritual interpretation of Reality itself. Faith may accept the last and deny the first and yet be entirely within its rights.

It is noteworthy that, as a matter of fact, Browning saw more clearly at this point than most religious teachers of his day or our own. Whenever he addressed himself to the fundamental problem of faith and doubt he stripped it at once of all adventitious issues and struck straight at the heart of the matter. In "A Death in the Desert" Saint John foresees the ultimate doubt of the coming centuries, to which

## OF ORTHODOXY

the traditions of the gospel story have become not so much an aid to faith as additional matter for question and debate. He hears men asking,

“Was John once, and did he say he saw?  
Assure us, ere we ask what he might see.”

With never a word about the evidence for the historical truth of the story, he proceeds to point out that without this conception of life as grounded in Infinite Love all the larger values fall to the ground; that either the story is essentially true, or else man is left to feed his spiritual longings on his own nature, which as the highest reality in existence—the only spiritual reality—must henceforth take the place of the God it has ruled out; which is spiritual suicide. On the other hand,

The acknowledgment of God in Christ,  
Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee  
All questions in the earth and out of it,  
And has so far advanced thee to be wise.

In like manner the Pope, facing the spiritual decay of his own time, when the externals of faith were so implicitly accepted by men who failed utterly to grasp their real significance, asks whether a new age may not be about to dawn, in which faith shall once more gain vitality through having to fight for its very life against a doubt which shall impeach its deepest convictions. In this manner did Browning interpret the age of doubt and spiritual conflict which

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

this modern period has proved to be. The poet and his Pope look forward undaunted to such a contest, assured that however imperfect our representations of spiritual truth, the story of Divine Love and Sacrifice must inevitably commend itself to the heart which unfeignedly seeks for spiritual sustenance.

Two things in Browning's representation of religious faith have a bearing on this matter of the right of the soul to trust its intuitions. The first is the insight that to make spiritual truth as self-evident as the empirical truths of everyday life would be to destroy its ethical significance. Both Saint John and the Pope employ this argument, which reappears in many other passages. There is no moral value in the recognition of the facts of nature. A burnt child fears the fire, but there is no moral quality to such fear. The obedience which is purchased by a gift of candy or a day at the circus is not ethical obedience. If spiritual truth were as self-evident as the axioms of mathematics, then no higher motive than self-interest would be involved in its acceptance. The man who set himself in opposition would simply be a fool. But leave room for doubt, and at once the spiritual values become a touchstone to prove the soul. The man who wants them to be true will live by them, will make them at all cost the working basis of his practical philosophy, while the man who prefers a life of self-indulgence

## OF ORTHODOXY

can still find opportunity to excuse himself. Thus life becomes once more a task, an achievement, and the just shall live by his faith.

The second is the kindred assertion that the real seat of faith is the will rather than the logical reason. Here Browning once more anticipates Professor James. The ultimate question is not what we think about life, but what we are going to do about it. / This is the meaning of "Christmas Eve and Easter Day." The first is a study in tolerance. The subject of this vision of the Christ is first taught not to despise any form of faith, however crude, which really brings the soul into contact with the Divine and inspires love in the hearts of men; and then he is warned not to rest in a mood of complacent indulgence to which all faiths seem equally good, but to make sure that he has himself acted up to the level of his superior insight. The second begins with the line, "How very hard it is to be a Christian!" The poet then expounds the vision whereby an easy-going and self-satisfied soul is taught that faith is not the settlement of intellectual problems, but the resolute choice of the highest good; and that the difficulties which beset the upward path are but the challenge of the Almighty to shake us out of our sloth and self-indulgence and impel us to the great adventure of making life worth while.

I thought, How dreadful to be grugged  
No ease henceforth as one that's judged.

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

He learns how degraded is the lot of one who is given all this world has to offer because he had proven unworthy the higher good of heaven, "left in God's contempt apart," "tame in earth's paddock as her prize."

This is the significance of "The Statue and The Bust," which has caused such heart-burnings to two generations of moralists. There is more hope for the soul which resolutely follows evil than for one which failed to embrace a wrong choice through lack of resolution to carry out its evil desires.

The sin I impute to each frustrate ghost

Is—the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin,  
Though the end in sight was a vice, I say.  
You of the virtue (we issue join)  
How strive you? *De te, fabula!*

The heart of the matter was perhaps never so forcefully put as in Bishop Blougram's challenge to the smug complacency of his skeptical interlocutor,

"What think you of Christ, friend, when all's said?  
Like you this Christianity or not?  
It may be false, but will you wish it true?  
Has it your permission to be so if it can?"

In a word, faith means not merely the calm, philosophical acceptance of the intuitions of the soul, but the resolute purpose to act upon them, to live as though they were indeed true. Small wonder that the easy-going age in which we

## OF ORTHODOXY

live, absorbed in playing with the countless new and entertaining toys which modern invention and discovery has placed in its hands; an age which has agreed that moral standards have no ultimate validity, but are mere social conventions of doubtful value, and which seeks in its art and music to be rid of the restraints of form that it may express itself in the untrammelled freedom of individualism, finds such a poet "mid-Victorian" and no thinker! Nevertheless, there are not wanting signs that even this age is beginning to awaken to the emptiness of life on any basis less than the spiritual. The prodigal cannot forever fill his belly with husks. Others besides Chesterton are beginning to discover that the longings of the soul are no different in this latest of all the centuries from those of the infancy of mankind, and that the truths which were valid once shall endure to all time.



## CHAPTER V

### OF STRUCTURAL *vs.* ORNAMENTAL TRUTH

IN our eagerness to find intellectual justification for our attitude toward life few of us stop to realize that in the order of importance, no less than that of time, life itself comes first and theory second. The digestion of food does not wait upon the study of physiology, nor the enjoyment of roses and violets upon a knowledge of botany.

Stonewall Jackson is said to have had in his army an old man who had long experience as a bridge-builder, but whose education was in the school of hard work. On one occasion it became necessary to replace a bridge which the Yankees had destroyed, and there was no time to lose. The General called the old man into his tent and explained the situation. "We must have that bridge at the earliest possible moment," he said. "Get a plan from the chief engineer and set to work at once." In the morning the general met the bridge-builder coming to report, and asked, "Did the chief engineer give you the plan?" "Gin'ral," replied the old man, "the bridge is done. I don't know whether the picter is or not." Life is a practical matter, and the building of its bridges will not wait. Few of us have our "picter"

## OF TRUTH

done when it comes time to report to the General.

Herein, once more, lies the significance of our discussion of the artist in his relation to the philosopher. The poet shows us the bridge in process of building—the thinker draws the plan. At bottom the two have to deal with the same essential principles. The practical man who has learned building by rule of thumb does many things which experience teaches him to be necessary; the engineer knows the reason for it, and can adapt it to unheard-of situations. When it comes to building, not temporary structures to meet a sudden emergency, but great permanent highways for the world's traffic, then the theoretical and technical knowledge of the engineer becomes of the utmost importance. A mistaken theory, an error in the tenth decimal place, may wreck the whole work.

But when the Brooklyn Bridge is finished, or the great bridge across the Firth of Forth, then comes the artist. He draws a picture. From thence he goes to a rude bridge across a highland burn and draws another. And when the two are put side by side we begin to see that the essentials in both structures are the same. Both rest on the same laws, both embody the same essential elements. The practical sense of the farmer and the theoretical training of the engineer both came to the same thing in the end. The artist was neither builder nor engineer, but his artistic in-

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

stinct led him to the structural features in the work of both; and so he revealed not only their essential kinship but also those things in the work of both which were necessary and fundamental.

The religious faith of which we have been speaking, the reliance upon intuition as the touchstone of essential truth, is in effect the necessity which is laid upon every man to build his bridge, and the necessary recognition of the validity of structural principles. The theologian and philosopher are the engineers who work out the general laws of building. The work of the artist and poet rests of necessity upon the same laws and emphasizes the same essentials of structural drawing. For practical purposes under the conditions of ordinary life, where not great rivers but simple brooks are to be spanned, the ordinary man may learn quite as much from the artist as from the technician. This is what people mean when they talk about seeking guidance from the poet in matters of faith. It is not the poet's business to work out in detail the technic of life or its fundamental theory; but he shows life actually going on, and his work reveals the truths which are of central importance as that of an artist reveals the structural lines of a bridge. Even though the drawing may cover but a small fragment of the whole, and may be concerned to display the grace of its ornamentation or the spider-web delicacy of its intricate fabric,

## OF TRUTH

the artist cannot avoid showing the bearings of truss and span. The more perfect his art, the more readily can the instructed teach even the casual observer to learn from the picture some of the essential laws of construction.

We come back, therefore, from yet another angle upon our contention that Browning is primarily an artist rather than a theologian. That he was an adept in the literature of philosophy and theology there can be no doubt, nor that it was of great service to him in the practice of his art. Michelangelo and Leonardo were both thorough students of anatomy; but that did not make them anatomists rather than artists, it merely rendered their art more perfect. No one would think of going to them to learn anatomy; none the less, if he wanted to know the essential perfection of the human figure, he would go to the Sistine Chapel rather than to the dissecting room. The significance of Browning's religious philosophy lies in the skill with which he has indicated the structural bases of human life. His poems are not an engineer's blue prints but an artist's sketches, like Whistler's Battersea Bridge. But the wayfaring man can learn more about bridges from Whistler than from a work on structural engineering, and the open-hearted reader may get more sound theology from Browning than from his minister. He may learn what truths in life are necessary and vital and what are subordinate and incidental; and he gets them not

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

in skeleton form, detached from all vital connection with reality like the scale-drawing of a structural detail, but in living relation to the actual conditions of life, where he may not only recognize them and identify them in his own experience, but may learn how they are combined with all that goes to make up the complexity of everyday life.

Seen from this point of view, these keystones and trusses in Browning's poetry become not the poet's personal opinions, which carry no more weight than anybody's opinions; they become the unconscious testimony of art to essential truth. They reveal the terrible spans and arches of reality, and make clear both the piers upon which they rest and the ties and braces by which they are held together.

We must make haste to get away from this figure, which is beginning to run upon all fours. The upshot of the whole matter is that the poet's principal stress seems to fall upon ideas which are vital in human experience, which have power to give meaning and color to life, and without which, as the state of mind of the present generation shows, life is empty and barren, a thing of shreds and patches. Let us go on now to see what are these structural truths in the poet's message.

### I

The corner stone of Browning's thinking is the idea of God.

## OF TRUTH

Like practically everyone else before the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Browning takes God for granted. It is true the earlier period of revolt denied the divine existence. Comte had declared that the idea of Law had come to fill the all-important place in human thought; that it had "conducted God to the frontiers of the universe and bowed him out, with thanks for his provisional services." Nevertheless, Voltaire founded a church in the name of God, and the Revolution invented a Deity for the new age, to take the place of the one which had been discarded. The spiritual interpretation of life was grounded so deeply in human experience and thought that it could be dislodged only by some thoroughgoing revolution like that afforded by the doctrine of evolution.

Browning felt the growing chill of scientific impersonalism, and sought to meet it by argument in the mouths of Blougram and Saint John and the Pope. The gist of that argument, as we have seen, consisted of a defense of faith as an organ of knowledge, or at least of life—a mode of reasoning in which Browning anticipated the apologetic method of the present day. The argument, as I believe, is both sound and unanswerable, but belief is seldom produced by argument. Of immensely greater spiritual value is the place held by the idea of God as the presupposition of the poet's work, the ground of his whole view of life. In "La Saisiaz" Browning writes himself as one

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

who "Believed in the Soul, was very sure of God," and the line, in effect, sums up his whole philosophy. The conviction that life in its essence is no barren and meaningless phantasmagoria of evanescent apparitions, still less the crude by-product of a blind and purposeless mechanism, is the background of all he wrote.

It is expressed in the eager assurance of Paracelsus:

"In some time, his good time, I shall arrive:  
He guides me and the bird. In his good time!"

It is the faith that sings in the happy voice of Pippa:

"God's in his heaven,  
All's right with the world."

I have heard parsons in sermons denounce this sentiment, declaring that very much is wrong with the world; and that, besides, God is not in heaven at all, but is immanent in the whole creation. The good men failed to see that the second part of their doctrine destroyed the first; and that the very idea of God means that, however mighty the storm, the ship of creation is not drifting rudderless and masterless through Chaos, but her Captain is on the bridge, and "All's well!" The whole story of Pippa is a commentary on her song, a suggestion of the God who ruleth all things according to the counsels of his own will.

The same faith forms the groundwork of the calm philosophy of the Pope, summed up in his conviction that even incurable moral blindness

## OF TRUTH

and willful rebelliousness cannot ultimately thwart the infinite purpose for good in which the human soul has its root. The positive "which must not be" disposes even of ultimate moral failure as unthinkable.

If sometimes the assertion of this faith seems somewhat robustious, if it gives rise to an optimism so thoroughgoing as almost to abolish the distinction between good and evil, we must remember the currents of thought which even during the poet's lifetime were bearing the modern world in the direction of a barren and mechanical interpretation of reality. Tennyson, who was much more sensitive than Browning to the thought-world with which he was surrounded, finds himself at times well-nigh swept off his feet, and can only "faintly trust the larger hope." The positive assurance of his brother poet that the spiritual interpretation of life must be true, no matter what difficulties of logic or of scientific induction stand in the way, is a tonic and wholesome influence in the spiritual life of the world.

In this Browning is something more than a mere exponent of religious orthodoxy. With the greatest among his contemporaries, Carlyle and Ruskin and Matthew Arnold, he sets himself definitely in opposition to the pietistic faith of the mid-Victorian era. But equally with them he maintains the essentially Christian view of life and its foundations, and he does so with a serener confidence in its stability. He knows nothing of



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

the uneasy misgivings, the pathetic spiritual loneliness which lends such a tragic air to their writings. The melancholy of Arnold, the fierceness of Carlyle, the gloom which often settles upon Ruskin, had their birth in a haunting sense of insecurity even as regards those truths which they asserted most earnestly. To Browning's healthier spirit, that life should not have a real and vital meaning, was unthinkable. Such a meaning must root in a spiritual interpretation of the universe. Given that, and everything else follows as a matter of course.

I reach into the dark,  
Feel what I cannot see, and still faith stands:  
I can believe this dread machinery  
Of sin and sorrow, would confound me else,  
Devised—all pain, at most expenditure  
Of pain by Who devised pain—to evolve,  
By new machinery in counterpart,  
The moral qualities of man—how else?—  
To make him love in turn and be beloved,  
Creative and self-sacrificing too,  
And thus eventually Godlike.

This same clearness of vision saved the poet from a confusion of thought into which the modern world has fallen. Browning insists that the spiritual interpretation of life stands or falls with the idea of God. Since his day there have not been wanting those who have tried to concede the impersonal mechanism demanded in the name of science, but at the same time to maintain the spiritual evaluation of life. Browning has small patience with that sort of thing. He knows there

## OF TRUTH

is in reality no middle ground between the personal and the mechanical. As Saint John declares, if there be no God, then man himself takes the place of God, which is unthinkable.

The poet knows as well as anyone else how feeble is human speech when it comes to deal with ultimate realities:

O Thou—as represented here to me  
In such conception as my soul allows—  
Under Thy measureless, my atom width!—  
. . . . .

Existent somewhere, somehow, as a whole;  
Here, as a whole proportioned to our sense—  
There (which is nowhere, speech must babble thus),  
In the absolute immensity, the whole  
Appreciable solely by Thyself.

It will be said that this is philosophy, not poetry; but I maintain that it is the representation of a mood, a spiritual emotion in the soul of the Pope, rather than a piece of pure reason. It is an attempt to voice the feeling that a truth too big for words has notwithstanding made its own ineffaceable impress on the soul. This recognition of the limitations of human thought is very far from the agnosticism which, starting from this recognition, denies all validity to man's religious aspirations. It is merely to declare, with the apostle, that "No man hath seen God at any time," that "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man."

There is no particular objection to the assertion often met with nowadays that God must be

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

supra-personal, provided this be not made the starting point for practical unfaith. What Browning everywhere insisted upon is that God must be conceived as the living ground of all that is deepest and best in man, and as such capable of entering into some sort of direct and personal relation with his creatures. He must be not only Power but Love. To prate of an Impersonal Love is nothing but confusion of thought.

The classical expression of the poet's viewpoint is found in the "Epilogue" to "Dramatis Personæ." Here the First Speaker, as David, represents the old anthropomorphism which found God in particular places and persons and not in others:

For the presence of the Lord,  
In the glory of His cloud,  
Had filled the House of the Lord.

The Second Speaker, as Renan, represents the agnostic chill that had fallen upon the nineteenth century as the purported revelation of God to the Hebrew nation faded into the mist of history, and men began to ask whether, if there were any such God, he ever had or, indeed, could make himself known to men:

Watchers of twilight, is the worst averred?  
We shall not look up, know ourselves are seen,  
Speak, and be sure that we again are heard?

. . . . .  
O dread succession to a dizzy post,  
Sad sway of scepter whose mere touch appalls,  
Ghastly enthronement, cursed by those the most  
On whose repugnant brow the crown next falls.

## OF TRUTH

The poet himself, as the Third Speaker, then proclaims his larger faith. As the sea, however boundless and universal, is nevertheless in particular and individual contact with each rock, so the Universal Soul has actually entered into personal relations with the individual human soul even in constituting it an individual:

When you acknowledge that one world could do  
All the diverse work, old yet ever new,  
Divide us each from other, me from you,

Why, where's the need of Temple, when the walls  
O' the world are that? What use of swells and falls  
From Levites' choir, Priests' cries, and trumpet-calls?

That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,  
Or decomposes but to recompose,  
Become my universe that feels and knows.

This is in reality all that Christianity has ever meant by the "personality" of God. No thinking man has ever believed in Haeckel's "gaseous vertebrate," an old man with a white beard. But Christianity has refused to believe that the human consciousness is the only or the highest form of spiritual existence. It insists on finding in the loftiest characteristics of humanity only the Divine image, and turns trustingly toward the Father of Spirits, confident that in him men will find their heavenly Father.

## II

Of course there is an element of danger in this proceeding. There is always the possibility that

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

men will read their own limitations and imperfections into the idea of God, and make him of like passions with themselves. Not paganism alone has suffered from this false and fatal anthropomorphism. In "Caliban upon Setebos" Browning has given us an elaboration of the text, "Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself."

Those commentators who see in this poem an attempt to make a serious contribution to the science of anthropology and to indicate how the idea of God arose in the soul of the cave man may be right; but if so, it is the only poem in all the work of a long life which has this abstract scientific character. It seems to be rather an exposition of the truth that "an honest God's the noblest work of man," and that when a beastly man reads his own beastliness into the character of God the result is grotesque enough to furnish its own refutation. One cannot but suspect that the poet had in mind certain forms of theology which have actually been current at various times in Christian history.

The story is well known of the retort courteous made by John Lord, afterward famous for "The Beacon-Lights of History," to the committee which was examining him for ordination over a church in Connecticut. Among other questions put to him was that one which was a favorite with our Puritan ancestors, whether he was willing to be damned for the glory of God. The young man

## OF TRUTH

replied that he had not attained to that lofty state of grace, but that he was perfectly willing the committee should be! Needless to say, he was not ordained.

The theological conception represented by that famous question was comparable to Caliban's thought that the favor of Setebos was as capricious as the monster's own attitude toward the soldier-crabs which marched past him to the sea:

'Let twenty pass, and stone the twenty-first,  
Loving not, hating not, just choosing so.  
'Say, the first straggler that boasts purple spots  
Shall join the file, one pincer twisted off;  
'Say, this bruised fellow shall receive a worm,  
And two worms he whose nippers end in red;  
As it likes me each time, I do: so he.

Small wonder that Caliban hopes that such a god may eventually "doze, doze, as good as die!" Such conceptions fall by their own weight before the criticism of life itself. Already the germs of a loftier truth are present in Caliban's soul in the conception of the Quiet, whose greater power must in the end overcome the sinister will of Setebos and give room for all creatures to live joyously in the world.

Caliban's notion that Setebos is on the lookout for those who give evidence of any enjoyment or pleasure, and that he will inevitably make them suffer for it, has also found its counterpart in popular religious thinking, if not in formal theology. It used to be quite the thing to warn mothers not to

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

love their babies overmuch, lest they offend the jealous majesty of the Almighty.

Over against this God who "kippers souls for sport," and can find his glory in the damnation of infants a span long, Browning sets his conviction of a Love as boundless as it is all-powerful. It is precisely at this point that the supreme necessity for faith becomes apparent. It requires no faith to recognize the Infinite Power which works in creation. Spencer declared the one unshakable conclusion of human experience to be the insight that we are "in the presence of an Infinite and Eternal Energy from which all things proceed." The supreme Wisdom displayed in the manifold adjustments whereby the universe is transformed from a chaos to a cosmos is equally evident—even though men confuse themselves with the notion of unconscious intelligence. But that the character of the Infinite is essential Love is not so clear. In the face of the contradictions of experience Mill concluded that either God is not perfectly good or he is not all-powerful. Tennyson finds that

Nature, red in tooth and claw  
With ravine, shrieks against his creed

of love. We shall return later to the consideration of Browning's treatment of the problem of evil; but the basis of his life-philosophy is his conviction that, despite all seeming, God is good, and the life of man is rooted in perfect Love.

## OF TRUTH

In defense of the reasonableness of this faith, he begins with the same thought which we have seen in a more general form in the mouth of Saint John, who declares, in "A Death in the Desert," that if God does not actually exist, then man is the only God, which is the supreme *reductio ad absurdum*.

In "Saul," David sees, with a sudden burst of rapture, that man's feeble and impotent affection must be but the faint image of the perfect Love, else in this one point the creature transcends his Creator. In all else man's powers are but the feeble reflection of the Infinite:

Have I knowledge? Confounded it shrivels at Wisdom laid bare;  
Have I forethought? how purblind, how blank, to the Infinite Care!  
Do I task any faculty highest, to image success?  
I but open my eyes—and perfection, no more and no less,  
In the kind I imagined, full-fronts me, and God is seen God  
In the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the soul and the clod.

Are we to suppose, then, in the face of this universal experience, that an exception is to be made in this one field of love?

Behold, I could love if I durst!  
But I sink the pretension as fearing a man may o'ertake  
God's own speed in the one way of love: I abstain for love's sake.  
—What, my soul? see thus far and no farther? when doors great and small  
Nine and ninety flew ope at our touch, should the hundredth appall?



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

In the least things have faith, yet distrust in the greatest of all?  
Do I find love so full in my nature, God's ultimate gift,  
That I doubt his own love can compete with it? here,  
the parts shift?  
Here, the creature surpass the Creator—the end, what  
Began?  
Would I fain in my impotent yearning do all for this  
man,  
And dare doubt he alone shall not help him, who yet  
alone can?

### III

It is at this point that the poet comes upon the fundamental part played by Christianity in the religious history of mankind. What is there in human experience to indicate that this love is a reality? The power and wisdom of the Infinite are manifest; no sane man has ever doubted them; but where is the equally convincing evidence of love? The Christian answer is the Incarnation.

What lacks then of perfection fit for God  
But just the instance which this tale supplies  
Of love without a limit? So is strength,  
So is intelligence; let love be so,  
Unlimited in its self-sacrifice,  
Then is the tale true, and God shows complete.

So the Pope. It is the fashion just now in polite circles to regard the doctrine of the Godhead of Christ as an invention of priestcraft, grafted on the simple religion of Jesus as a means of fostering the ambitions of worldly-minded ecclesiastics. It avails nothing to reply that this is to ignore the facts of Christian history; the opponents of Chris-

## OF TRUTH

tianity have never been hampered by regard for facts. But it is apropos to ask them where, if this tale is an invention, they will find the evidence for the goodness of God. It is possibly not an accident that the decay of faith in the Christian revelation has been accompanied by so widespread disbelief in the essential goodness of creation, and a recrudescence of the doctrine of force.

The statement of the Christian viewpoint in "Saul" is peculiarly forcible because the poet has put it in the form of a prophecy in the mouth of David. Lifted by the exaltation of his own yearning and unselfish love for the king to the insight that God's love must be yet more tender and all-compelling, the youthful psalmist bursts out:

"Would I suffer for him that I love? so wouldst thou  
—so wilt thou!  
So shall crown thee the topmost, ineffablest, utter-  
most crown—  
And thy love fill infinitude wholly, nor leave up nor  
down  
One spot for the creature to stand in! It is by no  
breath,  
Turn of eye, wave of hand, that salvation joins issue  
with death!  
As thy Love is discovered almighty, almighty be  
proved  
Thy power, that exists with and for it, of being Be-  
loved!  
He who did most, shall bear most; the strongest shall  
stand the most weak.  
'Tis the weakness in strength that I cry for! my flesh  
that I seek

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

In the Godhead! I seek and find it. O Saul, it  
shall be  
A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like  
to me  
Thou shalt love and be loved by forever: a Hand like  
this hand  
Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee!  
See, the Christ stand!"

I know of no passage in all the literature of theology which declares so eloquently and convincingly the truth which Christianity has from the beginning regarded as the most central and fundamental thing in her evangel. Here is no abstract reasoning about substance and nature, but a powerful statement of the yearning of humanity for understanding and sympathy in God. Doubtless the simple but profound truth of the gospel has not infrequently been overlaid with metaphysical speculation. More than once has humanity complained of the theologians, "They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him." The worship of Mary and the saints was at bottom nothing but the instinctive attempt of the human heart to find humanity in God when the Christ had become but a theological abstraction, an unknown quantity in a metaphysical equation. The Unitarianism of Channing had its root in the same essential protest against a wooden and mechanical theology in which the Son of man had disappeared in a mist of speculation. Nevertheless, the greatest power of the Christian gospel over the hearts and imagi-

## OF TRUTH

nations of mankind has lain in its conception of the suffering Love of God which stopped not at the supreme sacrifice for his creatures.

A God who could do no more for men than to inspire prophets and martyrs to die for them would be no more worthy of adoration than the rich man who hires a substitute to fight in his stead for the flag. Nothing less than a gospel of incarnation will ever satisfy the religious longings of the human soul. And as Dr. McClure, in Ian Maclaren's story, said of the faith of a dying child, "The Almichty wad see the wee lassie wesna pit tae shame, or else . . . that's no his name." A Christian minister may be forgiven, therefore, if this passage in "Saul" stirs his soul to deeper depths than any other in literature.

It is the same truth which grips the heart of "Karshish." This man of science, traveling in the interest of learning, is writing to his friend Abib of his chance meeting with Lazarus, mysteriously resuscitated from supposed death by a learned leech of his tribe who later perished in a popular tumult, doubtless because he was unable to stop the earthquake. The man and his story have made a strange impression upon Karshish. He tries in vain to shake it off. He speculates on the peculiar outlook on life displayed by this rude peasant, as though, indeed, he had access to a secret hid from the rest of mankind; but this is not the thing which has affected him most deeply. He tries to drop the subject, to avoid the main

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

issue. He apologizes to his friend for bothering him with such trivial matters. He endeavors once and again to bring his letter to a close. But certain things Lazarus has said cling to his memory and disturb his soul to its depths, until, against his will, he makes a clean breast of it, and lays the whole matter before his friend:

"This man so cured, regards the curer then  
As, God forgive me! who but God himself,  
Creator and sustainer of the world,  
That came and dwelt in flesh on it awhile!

The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?  
So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too—  
So, through the thunder comes a human voice  
Saying: 'O heart I made, a heart beats here!  
Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself!  
Thou hast no power, nor may'st conceive of mine,  
But love I gave thee, with myself to love,  
And thou must love me who have died for thee!"

### IV

So Browning finds at once the supreme evidence for the reality of the divine existence and the complete manifestation of the divine character in the personality of Jesus Christ. To a generation which accepted implicitly the infallibility of the Bible and the finality of the Augustinian theology, Browning's liberality on many doctrinal points seemed radical enough, and he became the patron saint of the revolt against orthodoxy. When a strict evangelical desired to bring a railing accusation against one of his more progressive brethren, he charged him with preaching

## OF TRUTH

Browning instead of the Bible. But the tide of battle has surged to another part of the field, and we begin to see that Browning was in reality defending the very citadel of the faith. So far from being an exponent of Unitarianism, his religious convictions rest on the central importance of the Incarnation in the spiritual history of the race. Saint John declares that

“The acknowledgment of God in Christ  
Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee  
All questions in the earth and out of it,  
And has so far advanced thee to be wise.”

Caponsacchi sees this much hope in his judges:

“You are Christians; somehow, no one ever plucked  
A rag, even, from the body of the Lord,  
To wear and mock with, but, despite himself,  
He looked the greater and was the better.”

True, Browning does not insist on the literal accuracy of the gospel narrative or the historicity of all the events therein described. The Pope questions whether the story be absolute, objective fact, or “truth reverberate, changed, made pass a spectrum into mind, the narrow eye”:

“So my heart be struck,  
What care I—by God’s gloved hand or the bare?  
Nor do I much perplex me with aught hard,  
Dubious in the transmitting of the tale—  
No, nor with certain riddles set to solve.  
This life is training and a passage; pass—  
Still, we march over some flat obstacle  
We made give way before us; solid truth  
In front of it, what motion for the world?  
The moral sense grows but by exercise.”

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

This is pure pragmatism. Doubtless it does not cover all the ground, but it recognizes a thing which theology has not always sufficiently considered, namely, the impossibility of making spiritual truth absolutely dependent upon historical information. When a truth has been borne into the human consciousness through an historical event, it becomes thereafter an unalienable possession of the soul. It "dies, revives, goes to work in the world," and henceforth possesses a validity independent of the particular happening in time and space through which it was first made known. Should the human race survive ten thousand years, it will doubtless be increasingly difficult to verify the historical truth of the four Gospels. But if the revelation of God in Christ is a permanent addition to the spiritual riches of the race, then it must have power in some sort to verify itself in consciousness, even to those to whom the historical events seem but an idle tale. This frank dismissal of the historical problem is, therefore, a real contribution to the problem of making Christianity both intelligible and credible to a critical age; and Browning becomes one of those who have aided most in furthering the transition from the naïve faith of the past to the assured and independent spiritual conviction of the future.

The significant thing is that the poet saw in the story of One whose love was the visible expression of the Love of God, and in whose death God

## OF TRUTH

somehow entered into the experience of human woe and sorrow, the most powerful and vital religious conception that ever entered into the heart of man. And founding his whole religious philosophy on the conviction that anything which answers a fundamental human need must be essentially true, he thus became a bulwark of spiritual faith against the assaults of modern impersonalism. The only God he knows is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; and the deepest thing in God he finds to be the love that stopped not at the ultimate sacrifice for the redemption of the race,

The divine instance of self-sacrifice,  
That never ends and aye begins for man.

This is essential Godhood. Pompilia, in a rush of tenderest mother-love for her babe, says,

"I never realized God's birth before,  
How he grew likest God in being born";

and Balaustion, describing the joyous weariness and robust tenderness of Herakles, declares,

"I think this is the authentic sign and seal  
Of Godship, that it ever waxes glad,  
And more glad, until gladness blossoms, bursts  
Into a rage to suffer for mankind,  
And recommence at sorrow."

If this religious thinking rests on concepts which are foreign to our modern philosophy, so much the worse for philosophy. The old debates over *homo-ousion* and *homoi-ousion* are vacated by



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

our better psychology; but the thing which the Nicene Creed undertook to express remains the one religious truth which has power to make God real and vital to human experience, and thus to satisfy the deepest longings of the soul. In making this the foundation stone in his art Browning becomes perhaps the most significant spiritual teacher of the nineteenth century.

## CHAPTER VI

### OF LIFE AND LOVE

THE orbit of human experience is an elliptical one, and the sun around which it revolves is the idea of God. The other focus of this ellipse is the idea of man. The two bear a constant relation to each other, and vary according to a fixed ratio.

We have nothing wherewith to measure our conception of the divine save our own loftiest ideals; hence it comes to pass that man inevitably creates God in his own image. During the long ages when the individual had not yet emerged from the human mass, and life was subject to the capricious tyranny of irresponsible despots, God was conceived as the supreme Tyrant, equally lawless and unmoral. Caliban can know no other God than Setebos. A scientific age which has learned that life moves in obedience to discoverable laws must conceive of God as moved by the same fundamental principles of order. As human life gains in dignity and power God must inevitably cease to be the irresponsible Despot and become the infinite Source of all wisdom and grace, the Fountain of light and life. When, however, the consciousness of man's subjection to his environment overpowers his

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

sense of freedom and responsibility, then the idea of God is reduced to that of a vast, impersonal Law, moving blindly toward unforeseen ends.

But the converse of this proposition is equally true. The idea of God, once conceived, reacts upon the human consciousness to heighten it. Vague impressions of life, dimly felt and half comprehended, are projected by the religious impulse upon the scale of the infinite, to become thereby the determining factors in the interpretation of life. The irresponsible deities of the pagan pantheon were not consciously the products of the imagination, but were the instinctive reactions of the religious consciousness in the presence of actual conditions. Once conceived, they had the effect of emphasizing the factors in experience of which they were the expression, and life became the more capricious and impotent. The God which mediæval Christianity inherited from Saint Augustine was simply a magnified Roman emperor, the shadow of the irresponsible tyranny to which every human life was subject; but the effect of the Latin theology was still further to depress the human consciousness. Man was conceived as totally depraved, as spiritually impotent, a worm of the dust, deserving nothing but eternal misery. Life as a whole was a failure, to be cast as rubbish to the void; and only a few might hope to be chosen by divine caprice to be the nucleus of a new heaven and a new earth.

## OF LIFE AND LOVE

It is worthy of note that the Reformation in religion followed the Renaissance in life. The growing sense of the worth and dignity of life made the old theology untenable. The individual began to emerge and to become conscious of his individual right and responsibility. The first effect was to heighten the individuality of God, so to speak; the sense of the absoluteness of the divine sovereignty. But the God of Calvinism was no longer pure Irresponsibility. The influence of the older thinking still persisted, but God was conceived essentially as infinite Righteousness and Justice and Truth, and he who feared God no longer feared the face of man. The result was to increase the independence of the individual, and Calvinism became the religion of democracy. No earthly king could tyrannize over the subjects of the Throne of Heaven.

At the same time the sternness and unbending justice of God were reflected in the character of the Puritans, with their harsh, unlovely conceptions of life and their rigid and uncharitable religion.

The inevitable correlation between these two factors in human thinking thus becomes apparent. They vary in a constant ratio. Progress comes sometimes from one side and sometimes from the other. A Prophet arises with a new conception of God, and old injustices and corruptions in human civilization are doomed. A

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

reformer appears in the political world, or new forces are brought to bear on society through invention and discovery, and old theologies grow too petty and cramped for the expanding soul of man.

The recognition of this relation between religious thinking and human experience does not by any means invalidate either religion or revelation. It is nothing more than the frank recognition that thought is a social product, that ideas can only be interpreted through experience and cannot arise until experience has prepared the way for them. Revelation itself is conditioned upon the receptive power of the human mind, and the times of ignorance God winks at.

That when once spiritual conceptions have emerged they exert an immeasurable influence upon life in reality bears incontrovertible witness to their essential truth. The ideas of God and man are as inseparable as the two ends of a stick. They react on each other and cannot be dissociated. Not until a factor in human experience has been erected into a fundamental principle of philosophy does it attain its highest degree of usefulness and power.

But when it has been so wrought into our deepest thinking and has reacted upon our conceptions of daily life and its meaning, then its limitations likewise become apparent, and it tyrannizes over us until it has been purified and corrected by the discovery of yet other phases

## OF LIFE AND LOVE

of truth. Thus Puritanism crystallized into a hard and mechanical type of religious Pharisaism, and the spiritual heroism in which it had its root was lost in the harsh bitterness of its despotic narrowness.

The working of this principle of the inevitable correlation between our conception of the ultimate Reality and our interpretation of human life may be seen in the shallow and mechanical thinking of which we have complained in the literature of the present day, and which has its root in the mechanical philosophy of modern science. Scientific writers are fond of accusing the theologians of "anthropomorphism," which they regard as the root vice of religious thinking, and from which they imagine themselves to be entirely free. As a matter of fact, the philosophy of Haeckel is nothing but the projection of the idea of law which has been found so useful in correlating the results of scientific induction. In itself it is as mystical and quite as anthropomorphic as the religious idea of love. The human mind is given to systematizing its experience, to grouping facts together for convenience in handling them. Hence arises the idea of laws, in accordance with which the facts hang together in such convenient groups. Modern science has simply extended this principle to include all experience, even such as has thus far proved intractable to scientific interpretation.

Among the generalizations of recent science,

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

one which has proved in some respects most useful is that which relates to the influence of environment upon the organism. This fits in with so much in the experience of mankind that it has captured the imagination of our time. This is the one among all the factors in human life which to-day is erected into the governing principle of reality. Everything which seems to contradict it is either ignored or explicitly denied.

To the lay mind it would seem that the opposite principle of the influence of the organism upon its environment is quite as universal in its operation and quite as significant for the interpretation of experience, but it does not exist for the cock-sure scientist. It is too intractable to the idea of law to fit in with the other conceptions upon which the scientific interpretation rests, so he will have none of it.

The underived remainder in the human personality which lies at the basis of all progress, the power whereby man reacts upon his environment to transform it, and which is the most central fact in human experience, has been flatly denied. The projection of the opposite principle upon the scale of the universal has become the corner stone of scientific thinking. The free Creative Power which earlier ages took for granted has thus disappeared, and in its stead we have Nature, which is only another name for the totality of Environment, working all things accord-

## OF LIFE AND LOVE

ing to the inevitableness of its mechanical necessity.

This mechanical system of metaphysics has reacted on our understanding of human nature as inevitably as did the Calvinistic theology. The doctrine of foreordination, which threw its baleful influence athwart the lives of the Puritans, was as nothing beside the deterministic psychology of the past twenty years. The earth has been peopled with automatic puppets who when the strings are properly worked outdo Mr. Punch himself in vigor of speech and action, but in whom there is not an emotion nor an aspiration which is not the outcome of "motor excitations in the ganglia." Love, hate, ambition, purpose, are secreted, like the bile or the pancreatic juice. Truth there is none. Sin and virtue have alike disappeared. Life itself is reduced to chemical reactions and galvanic spasms, and the light that never was on sea or land to a phosphorescent glimmer which there are none truly left to observe.

It is worthy of note that already there is a reaction in the scientific world from this extreme position, though it will doubtless be twenty years before the literary world will find it out. Psychologists are not so sure as they were even five years since that the Ego can be reduced to the "stream of consciousness." They are rediscovering the soul. Biology is losing its power to tyrannize over the world of thought, and there



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

are signs of a new day when humanity may come again to its own.

The "philosophy" of Browning centers inevitably around these two poles of all serious thinking. His idea of God grows out of his conception of humanity. It is the necessary ground and guaranty of that dignity and worth which the poet finds in human nature, of the destiny which alone can satisfy the longings of the human spirit. The chief interest of the poet is not in the divine but in the human side of this equation. He has been taxed with undue interest in metaphysical speculation, when, in fact, metaphysics has no interest for him except as it gives him breathing room, as it affords an adequate background for the varied and entrancing interest of the human drama played out before his eyes.

The extent and variety of this human interest in Browning we have seen. It is worth while to analyze the conception of human life in which it finds expression and justification. To go back to a figure which we have employed before: one end of the poet's bridge rests on his conception of the wisdom and loving purpose of God; the other rests on the freedom and essential divinity of man, as evidenced by his capacity for love, by his progress toward the ideal to which he forever aspires, and supremely by the destiny which religious faith demands and which alone can complete and satisfy the fragmentary experience of the earthly years.

## OF LIFE AND LOVE

### I

To begin with, Browning insists on the essential divinity of human nature. Having acknowledged that his conception of God is derived from his interpretation of life, this seems like reasoning in a circle. In fact, it is nothing more than that which we have seen to be characteristic of all human experience, the return of a philosophical conception upon the life in which it has its root, to heighten and perfect it. Browning believes in God because he finds man godlike. God forthwith becomes the source and ground of the loftiest human characteristics and the supreme reason for faith in the outcome of life. "Rabbi Ben Ezra" finds man,

for aye removed  
From the developed brute; a God though in the germ.

Nearer we hold of God  
Who gives, than of his tribes that take, I must believe.

The poem was published in 1865, six years after Darwin's *Origin of Species*, and antedates *The Descent of Man* by several years. There is no doubt that it echoes the fierce controversies to which Darwin's epoch-making work gave rise. The poet takes the ground that man is at once the crowning glory of the animal creation and the beginning of a spiritual kingdom. This is his answer to the philosophy which reduces humanity to the level of its brute ancestry.

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

This, by the way, is the root error of the biological school of thought. Taking his cue from Herbert Spencer, the true modernist can never rise above the study of origins. If consciousness is foreshadowed in the cell-affinities of the physical organism, then the mind is nothing but a chemical reaction. If religion had its rise in ghost worship, then it can never be anything more than crude superstition. If the moral intuitions grew out of, or were developed by, the experience of primitive tribes, then morality is nothing more than expediency. If love has its root in sex-instinct, then it is sentimental balderdash to find in it anything loftier than physical passion. The most recent attempts to construct a psychology of religion can find nothing but sex-emotion at the basis of the loftiest spiritual impulses.

Bosh! It is by its fruit, not its roots, that a tree is judged. Not origins, but ends, constitute the most important study for the human mind. Such speculations as I have cited are nothing but subtlety run mad. An oak tree is not an acorn, a man is other than a newborn babe, and some philosophers at least are greater than apes.

It is noteworthy that Browning himself anticipated the essential truth in Darwin's doctrine. "Paracelsus" was published in 1835, nearly a quarter of a century before the Origin of Species. In it we have such a spiritual interpretation of the doctrine of evolution as might have been furnished by a liberal theologian of the *fin de*

## OF LIFE AND LOVE

*siècle*. Paracelsus finds one thought and purpose everywhere. God

dwells in all,  
From life's minute beginnings, up at last  
To man—the consummation of this scheme  
Of being, the completion of this sphere  
Of life. . . . All tended to mankind,  
And, man produced, all has its end thus far:  
But in completed man begins anew  
A tendency to God.

We shall return to this thought again from another angle when we come to speak of Browning's conception of human progress. Here the important thing to note is that the poet goes behind the natural origin of humanity to find its essential root in the Power that lies behind the natural world—in the words of the Pope, "What I call God and fools call Nature." Man is, indeed, a part of nature, but he is more than that. He stands a handsbreadth removed from the rest of creation, that he may return to God "His creation's approval or censure."

Man therefore stands on his own stock  
Of love and power as a pin-point rock;  
And, looking to God who ordained divorce  
Of the rock from his boundless continent,  
Sees, in his power made evident,  
Only excess by a millionfold  
O'er the power God gave man in the mold.

Who speaks of man, then, must not sever  
Man's very element from man,  
Saying, "But all is God's"—whose plan  
Was to create man and then leave him

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

Able, his own word saith, to grieve him,  
But able to glorify him too,  
As a mere machine could never do,  
That prayed or praised, all unaware  
Of its fitness for aught but praise or prayer,  
Made perfect as a thing of course.

—("Christmas Eve.")

This insistence that man is essentially something more than result, that he is himself a cause, and so far free, was no doubt directed in large measure at the Calvinistic theology, whose shadow darkened the lives of Macaulay and Ruskin and Carlyle. But it serves no less in our own day as a challenge to the mechanical doctrines of recent science. *Aut libertas aut nullus*. Either religion is right in its insistence on the freedom of the mind and soul to work out their own destiny in the light of the loftiest ideals which it hath entered into the heart of man to conceive, or science no less than faith is doomed, for the conception of truth becomes as meaningless as that of right and duty, and the whole conscious experience of the race is reduced to a phantastic chaos. "Love, hope, fear, faith, these make humanity."

Arnold and Clough might roam forever in the darkness, seeking light and moaning the decay of faith. Tennyson might "grope, and gather dust and chaff." The younger generation which has succeeded may seek to content itself with a world from which spiritual faith has disappeared and to which it has become meaningless.

## OF LIFE AND LOVE

But Browning has never a moment's misgiving.  
With serene and cheerful confidence he takes  
his stand upon the essential worth of humanity's  
loftier spiritual traits and bids defiance to doubt  
and fear.

### II

The first element in the divinity of human  
nature, the first evidence of its essential freedom,  
the poet finds in the capacity for love. This  
is of the very essence of Godhood,

For the loving worm within its clod  
Were diviner than a loveless God  
Amid his worlds, I will dare to say.

Therefore a humanity capable of love is akin  
to God, and the whole purpose of human existence  
is "to glorify God and enjoy him forever." And  
love is, indeed, as central and fundamental in the  
life of man as it is in the character of God.

There is no good of life but love—but love!  
What else looks good is some shade flung from love;  
Love gilds it, gives it worth. Be warned by me.  
Never you cheat yourself one instant! Love,  
Give love, ask only love, and leave the rest!  
—"In a Balcony.")

For life, with all it yields of joy and woe,  
And hope and fear—believe the aged friend—  
Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love,  
How love might be, hath been, indeed, and is;  
And that we hold thenceforth to the uttermost  
Such prize, despite the envy of the world,  
And having gained truth, keep truth: that is all.  
—"A Death in the Desert.")

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

Paul Elmer More objects that as often as not it is mere blind human passion which Browning celebrates as a saving spiritual grace, and whose dawning rapture he likens to that new birth which transforms the soul—whence Mr. More concludes that the poet “dresses a worldly and easy philosophy in the forms of spiritual faith and so deceives the troubled seekers after the higher life.”

I confess my mental faculties are paralyzed by such criticism as this. Can it be that all the earnest and spiritually-minded souls who have found inspiration in Browning have been misled, and that they must be set right by the literary critic? Mr. More confesses that he has no idea what the mystical experience of the new birth may be, but he is quite certain it must be other and more significant than the birth of human passion with which the poet seems to identify it.

But is it so certain that Browning reduces the spiritual life to human love? There can be no doubt that his attitude toward such love is quite different from that of mediæval Catholicism. He does not regard it as a snare of the soul, but, rather, as a gift of God. But it would be more nearly correct to say that he exalts love to the plane of a spiritual impulse than that he reduces spiritual experience to the level of human passion. His whole treatment of love is a protest against the essential animalism of that view of life which can see nothing loftier

## OF LIFE AND LOVE

in the love of a man for a woman than sheer physical instinct. Love, to Browning, meant something quite different from what it meant to Swinburne or Oscar Wilde. There is nothing ethereal about it. He deals quite frankly and sympathetically with all its phases. He knows the love of the wronged girl in "The Confessional," the guilty passion of Ottima and Sebald, no less than the lofty purity of "James Lee's Wife," of "Any Wife to Any Husband," of Pompilia and Caponsacchi. Indeed, it is only fair to say that he undertakes to find spiritual significance even in love which has scarcely risen above the physical. He has puzzled his most ardent devotees by his apparent defense of sexual license in "Fifine at the Fair." But all this is precisely because he is so sure that the physical basis of human love is but the starting point, and that in its inmost essence it is a spiritual experience, not altogether remote from that creative impulse in which the Divine Love finds expression.

It is for this reason that he so often couples it with the dawn of spiritual insight, as in the case of Caponsacchi. Herein, despite Mr. More, he has anticipated modern psychology. But he has seen more deeply than the psychologists, who confound the spiritual vision with the human instinct in which it had its birth. Browning makes love the force which quickens the soul and leaves it open to those higher influences from the divine which transcend all human



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

power and lift man to the loftiest levels of spiritual insight. Other forces in human life may serve the same end. There are spiritual awakenings whose source is remote from the sex impulse, as there are sins which lie outside the realm of sex relations. The spiritual life itself is on quite another plane than that of simple human emotion, and love must pass over into something quite different before one can be said to have entered the spiritual realm.

No one knew this better than Browning himself. To charge him with identifying the spiritual life with human passion is to ignore whole masses of his most significant work. But love, to Browning, is the very flower of human experience, the purest and best thing in life, next to the love of the divine. If one can be true to this human impulse, if he love loyally and without reserve, his love becomes an instrument of God whereby a way is opened for the understanding of spiritual things. If a man prove false to his love, he has betrayed the best thing in his manhood, which is to lose his soul.

Thus it comes to pass that love, rightly taken, becomes an instrument of spiritual enlightenment. To understand this is at once to dignify human love and to assert the essential kinship between the human and the divine. It is at bottom a protest against the philosophy of dirt which reduces all human experience to the level of the brute. So far from being a denial of spiritual

## OF LIFE AND LOVE

birth, it is a reminder that such rebirths, in their deepest nature spiritual, are a part of common human experience. That there may be one such transformation of the soul's inmost life which transcends all other events in the history of spiritual progress is not denied. Indeed, it is to be inferred from the fact that a similarly unique and transcendent experience comes to the heart in the birth of a great love. The poet does not identify the two experiences, but he points out that the one may be the instrument of the other. It is not given to every man to love supremely. Neither is it given to every man to pass through a vivid and striking spiritual experience. But to every man love comes in some fashion, and if he proves himself worthy of it, it becomes to him a means of grace, purifying his soul and sweetening his whole life. And so to every man there may come the softening and purifying influences of the Divine Spirit, lifting him above the things that are of the earth earthy. But this divine grace can come only as he proves obedient to such spiritual impulses as are ministered to the soul through the common life.

Current philosophy does not believe in the transformation of the soul through the birth of spiritual insight. Browning insists that a man cannot truly love a woman without catching glimpses of a life on a higher level, where spiritual values rule. He bids us look on the world about

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

us with open eyes, and see that there are new soul-births, whether a mechanical philosophy likes it or not. Though they take place on the plane of human passion, they are not without spiritual significance. Browning could never have written "The Dark Flower," where one passion after another sears the heart with its flame, leaving the man no wiser or stronger or sweeter than it found him. Browning saw more deeply into human life than that. He knew that such experiences utterly transform a man for better or worse; that they are soul-revealing crises, whence a man emerges saved or lost, according as he has made "the terrible choice."

Oh we're sunk enough here, God knows!  
But not quite so sunk that moments,  
Sure though seldom, are denied us,  
When the spirit's true endowments  
Stand out plainly from its false ones,  
And apprise it if pursuing  
Or the right way or the wrong way,  
To its triumph or undoing.

There are flashes struck from midnights,  
There are fire-flames noondays kindle,  
Whereby piled-up honors perish,  
Whereby swollen ambitions dwindle,  
While just this or that poor impulse,  
Which for once had play unstified,  
Seems the sole work of a lifetime,  
That away the rest have trifled.

—("Cristina.")

That human love may prove the instrument  
of such a spiritual awakening any man who will

## OF LIFE AND LOVE

come out of the closet and look at real life with his eyes open must know. That human passion quite as often proves the soul's undoing and leads to irretrievable ruin and loss is equally evident. This is only to say that all the deeper experiences of life are fraught with meaning, and that the spiritual world impinges at every point upon the common life of men.

It is the glory of Browning as the poet of human love that no man has ever written of human passion with so broad a sympathy, so lofty an ideal of its spiritual power, with so great delicacy, such passionate tenderness. Tennyson is more virginal, Browning more human. To his mind, however, love is worlds removed from sublimated animalism; it is more nearly akin to the divine love.

This interpretation of human experience does not, of course, cover all the ground of the spiritual life, nor did the poet so intend it; but it is infinitely more wholesome and more true than the refined brutality of current literature. It reveals a sounder insight into essential values. Love in the poet's own experience brought him near to the gates of heaven—he would go to the old Marylebone church where they were wed and kiss the stone steps where his Love's foot fell—and he has challenged the world with an ideal of love which must forever rebuke the shallow sentiment and easy self-indulgence of men; and point to an interpretation of life which values

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

humanity not by the brute out of which it has emerged, but by the God into which the Creator will have it develop through all the experiences of life.

Lovers, therefore, will go back to "The Last Ride Together," to "Love Among the Ruins," to "Rudel," and "Cristina," and "Evelyn Hope," to "Love in a Life" and "Life in a Love," to the story of Pompilia and her "soldier-saint," and, above all, to "By the Fireside" and "One Word More," to find an interpretation of their love more completely satisfying than anything else in literature outside of Shakespeare. And the spiritually-minded will continue to read "Abt Vogler" and "Rabbi Ben Ezra" and "A Death in the Desert," "Karshish" and "Cleon" and "The Pope," to say nothing of all the poems of life and character which have thrown so vivid a light on the working of human motives and impulses, undisturbed by the fear that the poet will prove in all these things a "false prophet." whose easy-going optimism has "dressed a worldly philosophy in the forms of spiritual faith."

### III

It would not be fair, however, wholly to identify the love which Browning finds to be the supreme measure of life with the love of man and woman. This universal passion, at once so lofty and so human, tends continually to pass over into the

## OF LIFE AND LOVE

broader spiritual grace of which it is the type. In such a poem as "Life in a Love" no thoughtful reader can fail to feel that love has become the symbol of that ever-growing, ever-vanishing Ideal which is the flying goal of life's deepest endeavor.

So in that poignant reference to Dante in "One Word More,"

Dante, who loved well because he hated,  
Hated wickedness that hinders loving,

the poet is half-unconsciously moved by the spirit of Dante himself, whose love for the woman Beatrice was inseparable from his passionate devotion to the spiritual ideal of which she became the type.

Love, for Browning, is the supreme lesson of life. In the passage which I have quoted from "In a Balcony," the Queen is led by her sudden radiant vision of human love to understand the larger significance of the spirit of love, and when she speaks, her words bear witness not only to the supreme place of human passion in life, but no less to the ultimate worth of ethical love, the spirit of devotion and service. When Saint John speaks, in "A Death in the Desert," it is not human affection which he has in mind at all, but that supreme spiritual passion which Saint Paul celebrates in the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. If it be true that there are not a great number of specific passages in which Brown-

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

ing inculcates this spiritual grace, it is equally true that it is taken for granted throughout his work as the only adequate ethical motive and the supreme fulfillment of life. It must not be forgotten that the object of "Paracelsus," the work in which the young poet poured out his boy heart, is to set forth the utter failure of a life moved by any lesser spirit. Not until he has learned the lesson of love as a spiritual grace does Paracelsus attain. He explains his own earlier failure on this ground:

"In my own heart love had not been made wise  
To trace love's faint beginnings in mankind,  
To know even hate is but a mask of love's,  
To see a good in evil, and a hope  
In ill success; to sympathize, be proud  
Of their half-reasons, faint aspirings, dim  
Struggles for truth, their poorest fallacies,  
Their prejudice and fears and cares and doubts;  
All with a touch of nobleness, despite  
Their error, upward tending all though weak,  
Like plants in mines which never saw the sun,  
But dream of him and guess where he may be,  
And do their best to climb and get to him."

"The Ring and The Book," the colossal epic which embodies the ripe wisdom of the poet's maturity, teaches many varied lessons, but the warp into which this many-colored pattern is woven is the essential Christian ethic of love and service. The great-hearted charity of the Pope is the expression of it; the patience of Pompilia is the outcome of it; the sordidness and greed of Guido are thrown into relief upon this background.

## OF LIFE AND LOVE

Perhaps one of the finest expressions of this ideal in all Browning's poetry is to be found in his transcriptions from Euripides—introduced with Mrs. Browning's tribute:

Our Euripides the Human  
With his droppings of warm tears,  
And his touches of things common  
Till they rose to touch the spheres.

The protagonist of both these poems is Herakles, the Greek Christ, the incarnation of the loving-kindness of God. "Gladness go with thee, Helper of our world!" cries Balaustion, as the god sets forth on his mission to wrestle with death for the shade of Alkestis; and the spirit that breathes through both poems is the recognition of self-sacrificing love as at once the highest expression of godhood and the whole duty of man.

## IV

To the intense social consciousness of the present age it seems almost incomprehensible that a poet with Browning's all-embracing human sympathies should have seemed so entirely unconscious of social problems. It cannot be said that these problems had not emerged, for Browning was of the generation that produced Maurice and Kingsley and William Morris, and the publication of "Fors Clavigera" was begun only three years after "The Ring and The Book." Even Mrs. Browning displayed a keener interest in these matters than her husband: witness "The



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

Cry of the Children," and "Aurora Leigh" itself. It must not be forgotten, however, that Browning was a consistent Liberal, that he wrote "The Lost Leader" because of Wordsworth's defection in 1832, and that he displayed the warmest sympathy with the struggles of his beloved Italy against Austrian tyranny.

But Browning was both by temperament and philosophy an individualist. The outward conditions of life seemed to him but "A stuff to try the soul's strength on, educe the man." He realized, what reformers are continually forgetting, that society is made up of folks, and that all social progress rests, in the last analysis, on the development of individual character. The chief obstacles in its path are not bad laws and imperfect social machinery so much as bad men and imperfect human character. Though the aim of reform be to assure to all men comfortable homes, sufficient food and clothing, the opportunity for culture, and the like, yet the immediate effort of reform is always to protect men from the injustice and inhumanity of their more powerful neighbors. The so-called "progressive program" in American political life is concerned mainly with proposals for restraining the cupidity or guarding against the incompetence of men. Tariff reform is intended to prevent the unscrupulous manufacturer from charging too much for his goods. The recall is a device for getting rid of dishonest or incom-

## OF LIFE AND LOVE

petent officials. Political bossism, the bad trust, unreasonable restraint of trade, all are the fruit of greed and lack of common honesty. It is the capitalist who is unwilling to pay a fair wage and the laborer who is not worthy of his hire who together create the labor problem. It is selfishness which breaks up homes. It is self-indulgence which gives rise to the problems of vice and intemperance. If the money spent for the present hideous war, the outgrowth of mutual envy, greed, and distrust among the leading nations of Europe, had been turned into channels of legitimate production; if it might be augmented by the money spent during the last ten years in needless extravagance and vicious self-indulgence and by the cost during the same period of the enforced waste of idleness, inefficiency, and crime; and if the resulting gain might be honestly and fairly distributed among men, there would be an end of poverty and distress. The problem of character is the root-problem of social progress.

It is worthy of note that the characters in human history who have exerted the most powerful influence for the uplift of the race have been open to the same charge as Browning—of being individualists, and viewing with indifference the social struggles of mankind. Gotama, Socrates, Luther, Wesley, were individualists, bending their energies to the solution of the spiritual problem of the individual soul. In the degree of their

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

success in this direction was the power they exerted in behalf of human progress. All the ingenuity of Bouck White and kindred interpreters has not been able to make of Jesus Christ a political agitator and social reformer. In a world more than half slave he never mentioned slavery. So far from attacking the drink evil, he is said to have made wine for a wedding feast, and was called by his enemies a winebibber. If he attacked wealth and enjoined almsgiving, it was less in behalf of the poor than to save the souls of the rich. Though his zeal for righteousness led him into conflict with the grasping and powerful political leaders of his nation, and he was condemned to death as an agitator, the falsity of the charge is evident on its very face. He was the King of Truth, and walked through the world sublimely indifferent to the external conditions of life which enslave the soul and bring it into subjection to the things which are seen and temporal.

It is because Browning was moved by the same spirit, because he regarded the soul's interests as paramount and held the outward circumstances of life to be nothing but

Machinery, just meant  
To give thy soul its bent,

Try thee and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed,  
that he seemed so indifferent to the movements in the world about him which aimed at the improvement of social conditions.

## OF LIFE AND LOVE

The same thing is equally true of Kipling in our own day. No man of our time has seen more deeply into life, or held to the truth more sanely and steadfastly. In story and verse he has taught great, fundamental truths of democracy, of loyalty, of zest and meaning in the day's work; but the social movements which absorb the interest of Shaw and Wells might be nonexistent so far as he is concerned. For all that, his work will live when their names will have been forgotten.

We pass over the charge, therefore, that Browning was so absorbed in metaphysical speculations that he was indifferent to the great human problems of our time. On the contrary, it was because he was so concerned with the essential progress of the race that he devoted himself so assiduously to the consideration of those fundamental spiritual factors upon which all true progress must rest. What he sought was an evaluation of human nature, a ground broad and firm enough for a world to stand on. He was far in advance of his own day—in advance even of ours—in his sure confidence in the spiritual worth and dignity of humanity, and his belief in the inevitable triumph of the spiritual over the temporal.

Poor vaunt of life indeed,  
Were man but formed to feed  
On joy, to solely seek, and find, and feast.  
Such feasting ended, then  
As sure an end to men—  
Irks care the cropful bird, frets doubt the maw-  
crammed beast?

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

Then, welcome each rebuff  
That turns earth's smoothness rough,  
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand, but go!  
Be our joys three parts pain!  
Strive, and hold cheap the strain;  
Learn, nor account the pang; dare never grudge  
the throe. —("Rabbi Ben Ezra.")

Thus the poet's attitude toward those hardships and difficulties in human life which give rise to the social problem leads us directly to the consideration of his interpretation of the problem of evil, and of the relation of struggle to progress—a matter which requires a chapter to itself.

## CHAPTER VII

### OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

I REMEMBER professing at the outset that these papers did not assume to discuss Browning's "philosophy," nor to analyze his "message." Nevertheless I am conscious of having got into rather deep water. My only justification is that these are still "confessions," and that what I am trying to do is not so much to set forth what Browning intended to teach as to declare what in my own thinking finds illustration and confirmation in his work. This is what Browning means to me. At the same time I am confident that I do not entirely misapprehend the poet's own point of view. This, as it seems to me, is how life looked and what it meant to him.

The recognition of the poet's essential individualism, and of his interpretation of life's hardships and difficulties as "a stuff to try the soul's strength on," has brought us to the whole problem of evil, and to a closer examination of the poet's "optimism."

The problem is as old as Job and Ecclesiastes, or for that matter, as the Book of the Dead; as new as John Stuart Mill, as Nietzsche, or the Russian novelists. Whence come the limitations

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

and contradictions of life, its sins, its tragedies and sorrows, its brutal cynicisms, its glowing promises and heartless refusals, its deadly monotonies and ghastly terrible contrasts? Is it all illusion, whence the only escape is the cessation of desire? Is it a blind and cruel fate, to which we can only as blindly submit? Are the gods indifferent to human joys and sorrows, dwelling in the passionless calm of their infinite elevation? Or is the Almighty intent on his own glory, to enhance which men must be content to suffer and fail and be damned? May it not be that God is not the Almighty, after all, but that he is caught in the web of his own devising? That, having brought into existence a world of sentient creatures, he finds himself powerless to solve the contradictions of their lot, and can only helplessly await the outcome of their struggles? Or must we not say that for man to ask the meaning of life is simple folly; that so far as human knowledge goes, man is only a by-product of the operation of laws and forces whose workings he can dimly trace, but whose origin and whose outcome lie far beyond the scope of his feeble imaginings? Let him content himself within the limitations of his lot, using such discoveries as he may stumble upon in his daily experience to alleviate his condition as far as may be, with no questions asked as to anything beyond.

Such are some of the answers that have been suggested from time to time to the riddle of the

## OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

universe. Greek philosophy issued in stoical submission. Oriental pessimism looks only for annihilation or its equivalent in Nirvana. Modern science abandons the problem as insoluble. The latest suggestion is that of Bergson, who finds the Creative Power forever experimenting, feeling its way to ends which may and doubtless will prove good, but which are in no wise foreseen or predetermined. Or if the ultimate end may be regarded as purposed, the means thereto are the product of momentary activity and choice, as a practiced orator may know clearly the thought he desires to convey, but leaves the form in which it is cast to be determined by the accident of the moment, choosing his words and sentences and even his illustrations impromptu. Thus the spoken address is the product of the creative evolution of his thought, though the total impression upon his audience has been foreknown and predestined by his will.

There is much that is suggestive and helpful in this way of thinking. It relieves the Almighty to some extent of responsibility for the particular accidents of experience, and leaves room for the variety and freedom of real life. It helps to solve, for our feeling if not for our insight, the eternal contradiction between the sovereignty of the Infinite Purpose and the freedom of the individual will. But it assumes, as religion must forever assume, the rightness and worth-whileness of the whole process. We must at least believe



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

that the Eternal Orator has a meaning which he seeks at all hazard to convey.

This original assumption is a matter of prime importance. We may call the chessboard white or black: in either case the opposite squares are to be accounted for. As a matter of fact, few persons in the world have ever been really thoroughgoing pessimists. The very fact that the problem is universally recognized as the "problem of evil" instead of the "problem of good" indicates the underlying assumption that life is essentially right and just. The chessboard is white—it is the black squares that give us pause.

### I

As we have seen, Browning not only takes the worth-whileness of life for granted, but he heartily accepts all the implications that go with it. It is the robustness of his assertion of life's values that has given him the title of "optimist."

This world's no blot for us or blank,  
It means intensely and means good;  
To find its meaning is my meat and drink.  
—("Fra Lippo Lippi.")

That this is only a preliminary assumption Bishop Blougram frankly admits, but he points out with equal clearness the instability of the opposite assumption. Suppose we deny the validity of faith?

## OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

. . . All we've gained is, that belief,  
As unbelief before, shakes us by fits,  
Confounds us like its predecessor. Where's  
The gain? How can we guard our unbelief,  
Make it bear fruit to us?—the problem here.  
Just when we are safest, there's a sunset-touch,  
A fancy from a flower-bell, some one's death,  
A chorus-ending from Euripides—  
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears  
As old and new at once as nature's self,  
To rap and knock and enter in our soul,  
Take hands and dance there, a fantastic ring,  
Round the ancient idol, on his base again—  
The grand Perhaps!

This is a matter not sufficiently considered by our modern pessimists. Given the sun, it is easy enough to account for shadow. If we fix our minds on shadow as the ultimate reality, it is not so easy to account for light. Given reason, we may readily appreciate the folly of ignorance or childishness; but what shall we say of the triumphs of reason if unreason be the ground of reality? Given goodness as the sum of things, we understand how willfulness may sin against the truth. But if reality is, after all, nothing but the chance by-product of hidden necessities, whence the immeasurable significance of justice and love?

The problem of evil is dark enough. Progress through the suppression of the unfit, life supported through the death of the innocent, nature red in tooth and claw; history drenched with the blood of endless strife; civilization resting on the

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

bowed necks of serfs—these things shriek against our creed. The man who has not felt the unspeakable tragedy of existence, whose heart has not stood still before the horror of this bottomless Inferno which we call human life, has no right to speak. The rosewater gospel so attractive to many modern folk, which blithely shuts its eyes and says there is no evil, represents only the despair of feeble minds.

Nevertheless, there are only two alternatives. Life either means something or it does not. Either there lies behind it a sleepless wisdom, and “through the ages an increasing Purpose runs,” or it is “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Neither view may be demonstrated beyond a peradventure. Either one is a faith, a working hypothesis, chosen because it seems to fit in with the greater number of facts. If, then, we assume the eternal Wisdom, we may find hints regarding the significance of evil which at least may “stop our despair.” If we deny this assumption, we not only are left without any tangible clew, but goodness and truth themselves are left meaningless and void.

The conviction that even the darkest problems of sin and pain are not utterly opaque to the infinite Wisdom and Love is nothing more than the application to the realm of the spirit of the principle which lies at the very foundation of science, namely, that no part of creation, however baffling, can prove ultimately intractable to

## OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

reason. The assumptions of science are every whit as mystical as those of religion. The unsolved problems of science are as perplexing. The affirmations of science quite as often as those of theology seem to the wayfaring man to smack of mythology. We are wont to visit our scorn on the futility of mediæval scholasticism, wasting itself in such bootless discussions as, "how many angels can dance on the point of a cambric needle?" The affirmations of recent physics concerning the ether, rapt descriptions of the dance of electrons within the orbit of an atom of hydrogen, and various similar matters familiar to the reader of recent scientific literature, are in point of fact quite as remote from the tangible realities of every day, and quite as dependent on the supposed exigencies of a system of logical reasoning, as scholasticism itself.

Far be it from a mere layman so much as to express an opinion on these high matters. One must endeavor to exercise a modesty and self-restraint which, alas! is quite foreign to the magazine scientist—sometimes, indeed, to his masters. But the layman is quite within his rights to protest that if science requires these abstruse mythologies as the background of her practical discoveries, she has no right to object if the man of God claims equal right to make those assumptions which his experience and study have shown him are needful for the interpretation of spiritual problems.

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

### II

The question has often been raised whether Browning's optimistic view of life did not rest at bottom on temperament and unbroken physical health, rather than on superior insight or a successful working philosophy. We are told that his bodily vitality affected others like an electric shock. He seemed to radiate health and good spirits. He drew Elizabeth Barrett out of the shadow of death by the sheer force of his will to live and to make her live.

Why, it is asked, should not a man who was never sick a moment in his life, whose vital energies were always above par, take a cheerful view of life? How could he help being an optimist? As Henry Ward Beecher declared, when asked whether life is worth living, "That depends on the liver."

It is nothing to the point to reply that Browning was subject to terrible headaches which interrupted his work for days at a time, and gave his sympathetic correspondent much anxious concern; since a modern doctor would doubtless have attributed these sufferings to eyestrain, caused by that unequal vision to which we have elsewhere referred. Headaches due to a sluggish liver might cause hypochondria, but those due to eyestrain do not usually affect either the general health or the mental attitude.

The real answer to this contention is that those who make it by the same token admit

## OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

that optimism is the sane and normal attitude, and that pessimism is the product of disordered nerves and low physical vitality. The proper place for its advocates is the sanitarium. Let us cheerfully grant that Browning was a vigorous and healthy Englishman who took a perfectly simple attitude toward life, neither rebelling at its limitations nor whimpering at its hardships, but resolutely striving to make the best of it, and to discover what way of thinking about it yielded the broadest and most enduring foundations for such an attitude. The very presence of such a vigorous and wholesome personality in our literature has a tonic effect.

I shall never forget hearing a literary friend tell of his real introduction to Browning. He had studied him perfunctorily, of course, as a part of his college work, but nothing in the poet as presented in the classroom had especially appealed to him. One day, in a mood of great depression, he was browsing aimlessly through the college library, when he picked up a volume of Browning. The book opened at the last page, and his eyes fell on the "Epilogue" to "Asolando":

What had I on earth to do  
With the slothful, with the mawkish, the unmanly?  
Like the aimless, helpless, hopeless, did I drivel,  
—Being—who?

One who never turned his back but marched breast  
forward,  
Never doubted clouds would break,

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong  
    would triumph,  
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,  
    Sleep to wake.

The lines rang in his ears like a trumpet-call. His mood of despondency vanished like mist before the morning sun, and in its place came a resolve to face life with the courage and resourcefulness of which the poet sang. Afterward he found that this keynote resounds through the whole of Browning's poetry, and he discovered he had made a new literary friend.

I am quite ready to grant that Browning's attitude toward life is the triumph of personality over the outward conditions of existence. Such triumph is perhaps more obvious in the case of a man who, like Stevenson, maintains his cheerful courage in the face of disease and death, but Browning's healthful vigor bears no less powerful witness to the essential sanity of those who believe in the best of life. It is because he "was ever a fighter" that he could hold even failure as but "a triumph's evidence for the fullness of the days," and treat the ills that flesh is heir to with such disdain. His poetry is a constant challenge to emulate the same dauntless courage. When Mr. More desires to discover the secret of Browning's undiminishing popularity he would do well to take this into account.

I admit that at times Browning's assertion of his courage is almost robustious. I fear that

## OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

sometimes he doth protest too much. For all that he *is* a fighter, and he never wields his sword so doughtily as when his back is to the wall and the odds are against him. Like Childe Roland, it is when the apparitions of evil about him have done their utmost to terrify him, and the "Round squat turret, blind as the fool's heart," confronts him at last, that "dauntless the slug-horn to his lips he sets," and blows defiance to the powers of darkness.

He has learned that God is, after all, not on the side of the heaviest battalions—Napoleon spoke too soon; at Saint Helena he might have made a different remark.

"*Instans Tyrannus*" is a study of the powerlessness of evil in the face of simple truth and faith. The most malevolent power quails in the end before the might of innocence. God and one are a majority.

When sudden—how think ye, the end?  
Did I say, "without friend"?  
Say rather, from marge to blue marge  
The whole sky grew his targe  
With the sun's self for visible boss,  
While an Arm ran across  
Which the earth heaved beneath like a breast,  
Where the wretch was safe prest!  
Do you see? Just my vengeance complete,  
The man sprang to his feet,  
Stood erect, caught at God's skirts, and prayed!  
—So, *I* was afraid!

As I have said in an earlier chapter, I am quite willing to grant that Browning's philosophy



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

of optimism is the outcome rather than the cause of his optimistic attitude. He believes in life because he cannot help himself—because to him it “did and does smack sweet.” His reasons for this attitude are an afterthought. He believes them because, if they are not true, his whole life-structure falls to the ground.

But, as I have argued before, all this is but greater evidence of their essential validity. If life must be meaningless without certain great faiths, then let us hold that truth against the world. It is no answer to say that merely wishing things to be true does not make them so. In the greatest things it does. Or, perhaps better, in all the deeper experiences of life the desire and its supply are necessary correlatives. The hunger of the babe no more surely indicates the breast than the hunger of the soul for friendship and love prophesies its fulfillment. To go on and apply the same principle to the loftiest ideals of life, and even to the soul’s yearning for God and immortality, is but the conviction that life is all of one piece.

In a very true sense the largest meanings of life have their ultimate validity in nothing in the world but the will to make them real. If it be true that beneath all this lies the structure of Creation itself, or, as our fathers would have said, the will of God, yet so far as we are concerned the will that truth and love *shall be* is essentially creative—these things do not and

## OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

cannot exist for us except as we desire them. They exist only in our desire, and the strength of that desire is the measure of our power to bring them to pass.

### III

It is evident, therefore, that the underlying ground of the poet's interpretation of the problem of evil is his conviction of the worth and significance of human life, and his reliance on the reality and power of the Infinite Wisdom and Love in which that life has its root. He maintains this faith, not by shutting his eyes to the sorrow and sin and pain of life, but by holding fast to his conviction in the face of all the facts.

Is God love indeed,  
And will ye hold that truth against the world?  
—"A Death in the Desert.")

Like Saint John and the Pope, Browning sees all "this dread machinery of sin and sorrow, would confound me else," against the background of this Love. For him as for Lowell, "Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own."

It is in this light that he seeks to interpret the darker places of experience. He brings forward a number of suggestions, none of which is intended to cover all the ground, but all of which indicate that even for our feeble insight the problem is not altogether opaque.

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

His first suggestion is that evil is intended to afford that resistance to the soul's efforts through which alone strength can be attained. We have already remarked that his feeling of the necessity of such soul-discipline rendered him almost oblivious to the social movements which aim at the alleviation of human misery. Even the moral weaknesses which cause the religious thinker so much concern Browning sees as the essential condition of true moral freedom and worth. The friction which checks the working of our machinery is the necessary condition of its working. The resistance of the atmosphere which hinders the flight of the bird is essential to its flight.

Let us not always say,  
"Spite of this flesh to-day  
I strove, made head, gained ground upon the whole."  
As the bird wings and sings,  
Let us cry, "All good things  
Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more now than flesh helps  
soul." —("Rabbi Ben Ezra.")

No, when the fight begins within himself,  
A man's worth something. God stoops o'er his head,  
Satan looks up between his feet—both tug—  
He's left, himself, i' the middle: the soul wakes  
And grows. Prolong that battle through his life!  
Never leave growing till the life to come!  
—("Bishop Blougram's Apology.")

Was the trial sore?  
Temptation sharp? Thank God a second time!  
Why comes temptation but for man to meet  
And master and make crouch beneath his foot,  
And so be pedestal'd in triumph? Pray,  
"Lead us into no such temptations, Lord!"

## OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Yea, but, O Thou whose servants are the bold,  
Lead such temptations by the head and hair,  
Reluctant dragons, up to who dares fight,  
That so he may do battle and have praise.

—("The Pope.")

Closely akin to this is the suggestion of Bishop Blougram that God must needs thus hide himself behind the darkness of human experience, because the naked soul is too feeble to bear the shock of clear insight:

Some think, Creation's meant to show him forth:  
I say it's meant to hide him all it can,  
And that's what all the blessed evil's for.  
Its use in Time is to environ us,  
Our breath, our drop of dew, with shield enough  
Against that sight till we can bear its stress.  
Under a vertical sun, the exposed brain  
And lidless eye and disemprisoned heart  
Less certainly would wither up at once  
Than mind, confronted with the truth of him.

Another phase of the same principle is the idea that man can truly learn only through experience, which implies mistake and failure.

When a soul has seen  
By the means of Evil that Good is best,  
And, through earth and its noise, what is heaven's  
serene,—

When our faith in the same has stood the test—  
Why, the child grown man, you burn the rod,

The uses of labor are surely done;  
There remaineth a rest for the people of God.

—("Old Pictures in Florence.")

This is the ground of David's hope for Saul:  
The man taught enough by life's dream, of the rest  
to make sure;

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

By the pain throb triumphantly winning intensified  
bliss,  
And the next world's reward and repose by the struggles of this.

There are always two ways of learning the force of any law—one is by obedience, the other by disobedience. The former is more direct and perfect—happy the world if men had never chosen any other path. Nevertheless, the path of disobedience no less surely teaches the errant soul the worth and significance of truth. The burnt child fears the fire. It may be that in the long run those who have tasted the dire effects of lawlessness and self-will, and have been driven thereby to renewed allegiance to the eternal Right, shall prove of superior spiritual power and worth to those whose sober wishes never learned to stray. Is it not written of the elect, “Ye shall judge angels”?

Still another kindred notion is that of Abt Vogler, that evil forms the necessary background of good, the contrast without which goodness itself could not be understood and appreciated.

The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound.

Why was the pause prolonged but that singing might  
issue thence?  
Why rushed the discords in but that harmony should  
be prized?

We need not pause upon the doctrine that evil is in itself essentially negative. Our Christian Science friends have rung the changes upon

## OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

this notion. They have not always sufficiently considered that a negative evil may be just as disastrous as a positive one. A hole may be said to be negative, a disease germ positive: nevertheless a hole will sink a boat quite as successfully as tuberculosis will destroy a man. Browning for one has no illusions on this head. He knows full well the power of evil in human experience, but he is so confident of the greater power of good to overcome it that in comparison the evil seems negligible.

The other doctrine, that without the contrast of evil good could not be truly experienced, requires a word. John Fiske made much of this doctrine in his suggestive little book, *Through Nature to God*. In so far as it contains a germ of truth, it undoubtedly contributes to a theodicy. Rest is sweet after toil, and freedom from pain is bliss after sore anguish. But as I have elsewhere written in this connection, "Silence does not of necessity imply sound, for there is a silence which results from the smashing of the violin, the wreck of the organ. Discord sometimes has no meaning, when sweet bells become 'jangled, out of tune and harsh.' Moreover, when we get away from the metaphor, evil, so far as it is *moral* evil and not mere ignorance and mistake, is the deliberate choice of a will acting in opposition to its own best impulses. From this point of view sin is as positive as righteousness. The personality of the man who sins is as active

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

in hate as in love. Hate may be a wrong use of the power to love, but a use it is, not mere failure to use. The hate is as positive as the love. Whether or not it shall be as eternal must be determined on other grounds than mere figures of speech" ("The Poet's Vision of Man," p. 23). If the principle of contrast should be erected into an eternal and fundamental law, it would justify the teaching of Tertullian that the joys of heaven will be enhanced by the sight of the torments of the damned, and God himself might be suspected of being incapable of essential goodness unless he had first passed through an experience of infinite sin.

As a matter of fact, the principle of contrast, when pushed to such extremes, rests on a false psychology. It is the echo of English sensationalism, the philosophy of Locke and Hume, of Mill and Spencer, which regarded the mind as a *tabula rasa*, the passive recipient of impressions forced upon it from without. In such a process we might conceive that contrast would give effect to sensations of opposite character, and that each would be interpreted purely in terms of the other. Yet even then it is permitted to ask how contrasted experiences could ever in a passive mind give rise to an experience of contrast. But, as a matter of fact, sweet and sour, dark and light are *not* interpreted in terms of each other. Each is an independent experience, having its own peculiar quality. When

## OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

we reach the insight that all experience is simply the mind reacting according to its own inherent nature to the stimuli which reach it from the world without, we begin to see that every particular experience, whether of pleasure or of pain, of good or of evil, stands in its own right. It is an ultimate fact. The mind has all these various kinds of experience because, like the bears and lions of Isaac Watts's nursery rhyme, "it is its nature to," and there is nothing more to be said.

What is true with regard to these pairs of opposites in sensation and experience is that contrast heightens their effect in consciousness. From this point of view we may agree that pain helps us to appreciate the value of health, and evil bears powerful witness to the worth of that which is good. So long as we keep it steadily in mind that this single principle does not cover all the ground and must not be erected into an absolute truth, we may find many instances where it helps us to a real understanding of life's mysteries. As we shall see, it requires a further principle to complete it; for, so far as this world goes, evil is often the last word, and if the contrasted good is to be attained, it must be in some future life, where the discords may be resolved. It is only fair to say that it is precisely in this connection that Browning employs the doctrine, as heightening the demand for the life beyond.



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

### III

All these lesser principles for the understanding of the problem of human suffering and sin are subordinate, however, to the supreme law whereby Browning interprets the whole of life, namely, that of Progress. As the evolutionist finds in the struggle for existence the chief instrumentality through which the higher and more significant forms of life have been developed, so the poet sees in the limitations and inequalities of human experience the essential factors in the growth of the soul.

We have seen how the fact that life is a continuous development of which man is the crowning glory finds expression in "Paracelsus":

All tended to mankind,  
And, man produced, all has its end thus far:  
But in completed man begins anew  
A tendency to God.

The same truth finds illustration in all Browning's most significant work. Saint John declares progress

Man's distinctive mark alone,  
Not God's, and not the beasts': God is, they are,  
Man partly is and wholly hopes to be.

I say that man was born to grow, not stop.

—Man is not God, but hath God's end to serve,  
A master to obey, a course to take,  
Somewhat to cast off, somewhat to become.  
Grant this, then man must pass from old to new,  
From vain to real, from mistake to fact,  
From what seemed good to what proves best.  
How could man have progression otherwise?

## OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Rabbi Ben Ezra finds the end of life to be, that one shall

Pass, approved  
A man, for aye removed  
From the developed brute; a God though in the germ.

It is from this point of view that all the experiences of life are to be judged. Is man's mind feeble of grasp, his will warped, his judgment imperfect? How else? Man is but a child. His distorted notions of truth are but the groping of an undeveloped mind after reality. His superstitions are only faiths half-understood. Even his sins are in the main but childish willfulness and folly. He is put into this world to learn and grow.

Such progress could no more attend his soul  
Were all its struggles after found at first  
And guesses changed to knowledge absolute,  
Than motion wait his body, were all else  
Than it the solid earth on every side,  
Where now through space he moves from rest to rest.  
—("A Death in the Desert.")

An interesting putting of this truth is found in "Old Pictures in Florence," where the crude attempts of the earlier mediæval artists to paint the things they saw are preferred to the highest perfection attained by Greek sculpture, simply because they point to progress. Greek art marked absolute perfection.

So, you saw yourself as you wished you were,  
As you might have been, as you cannot be;  
Earth here, rebuked by Olympus there:  
And grew content in your poor degree

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

With your little power, by these statues' godhead,  
And your little scope, by their eyes' full sway,  
And your little grace, by their grace embodied,  
And your little date, by their forms that stay.

So, testing your weakness by their strength,  
Your meager charms by their rounded beauty,  
Measured by Art in your breadth and length,  
You learned—to submit is a mortal's duty.  
—When I say “you” ’tis the common soul,  
The collective, I mean: the race of Man  
That receives life in parts to live as a whole,  
And grow here according to God's clear plan.

Growth came when, looking your last on them all,  
You turned your eyes inwardly one fine day  
And cried with a start—What if we so small  
Be greater and grander the while than they?  
Are they perfect of lineament, perfect of stature?  
In both, of such lower types are we  
Precisely because of our wider nature;  
For time theirs—ours for eternity.

To-day's brief passion limits their range;  
It seethes with the morrow for us, and more.  
They are perfect—how else? they shall never change:  
We are faulty—why not? we have time in store.  
The Artificer's hand is not arrested  
With us; we are rough-hewn, nowise polished:  
They stand for our copy, and, once invested  
With all they can teach, we shall see them abolished.

'Tis a lifelong toil till our lump be leaven—  
The better! What's come to perfection perishes.  
Things learned on earth we shall practice in heaven:  
Works done least rapidly, Art most cherishes.  
Thyself shalt afford the example, Giotto!  
Thy one work, not to increase or diminish,  
Done at a stroke, was just (was it not?) “O!”  
Thy great Campanile is still to finish.

## OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

On which I conclude, that the early painters,  
To cries of "Greek art and what more wish you?"—  
Replied, "To become now self-acquainters,  
And paint man, man, whatever the issue!  
Make new hopes shine through the flesh they fray,  
New fears aggrandize the rags and tatters:  
To bring the invisible full into play!  
Let the visible go to the dogs—what matters?"

This doctrine, that life is to be interpreted not by what it is but by what it promises, may be applied to many different phases of human experience. It enables us to rest content in our imperfect insight, striving ever for more perfect understanding, yet nowise disheartened by our failure to penetrate the baffling mystery of existence; since our very failure bears witness to the vastness of the truth we would comprehend, while the unsatisfied hunger for truth proclaims our kindred greatness.

The same principle makes it possible for us to recognize clearly our moral weakness and folly without sinking into the impotence of despair, since we are assured that if we persist, our moral struggles must be crowned with victory.

"Tis not what man does that exalts him, but what man would do. —("Saul.")

What I aspired to be  
And was not, comforts me:  
A brute I might have been but would not sink i' the  
scale. —("Rabbi Ben Ezra.")

As the efforts of a child are valued, not for what they accomplish but for what they promise,

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

and because they afford training and experience,  
so humanity's attainments are far less important  
than the effort they called forth.

Here work enough to watch  
The Master work, and catch  
Hints of the proper craft, tricks of the tool's true play.

Above all, it is the aspiration after truth, the  
desire to achieve, the hunger and thirst after  
righteousness, that are the real measure of man's  
value, not only to society, but to himself and  
to God.

Not on the vulgar mass  
Called "work," must sentence pass,  
Things done, that took the eye and had the price;  
O'er which from level stand  
The low world laid its hand,  
Found straightway to its mind, could value in a trice.

But all the world's coarse thumb  
And finger failed to plumb,  
So passed in making up the main account;  
All instincts immature,  
All purposes unsure,  
That weighed not as his work yet swelled the man's  
amount.

Thoughts, hardly to be packed  
Into a narrow act,  
Fancies, that broke through language and escaped;  
All I could never be,  
All, men ignored in me,  
This I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher  
shaped. —(Ibid.)

This principle likewise affords some measure  
of meaning to the experience of disappointment

## OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

and suffering. If a man may believe that his own character gains in wisdom and strength through such experiences, then he can afford to "be patient and proud and soberly acquiesce." The Pope bids Caponsacchi

"Be glad thou hast let light into the world,  
Through that irregular breach o' the boundary—see  
The same upon thy path and march assured,  
Learning anew the use of soldiership,  
Self-abnegation, freedom from all fear,  
Loyalty to the life's end! Ruminatè,  
Deserve the initiatory spasm—once more  
Work, be unhappy but bear life, my son!"

Rabbi Ben Ezra goes still further, and declares all life to be nothing but

"Machinery, just meant  
To give thy soul its bent,  
Try thee and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed."

In the same mood Saint John says, in a passage we have quoted before,

"For life, with all it yields of joy and woe  
And hope and fear—believe the aged friend—  
Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love,  
How love might be, hath been indeed, and is;  
And that we hold thenceforth to the uttermost  
Such prize despite the envy of the world,  
And, having gained truth, keep truth: that is all."

One further consideration appears in the poet's interpretation of the character of Christ, namely, that suffering often becomes a revelation of the Infinite love, and so becomes an instrument in furthering the growth of another's soul. Even

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

human suffering may bear that quality, as Pompilia declares when she bids her soldier-saint

“Wait God’s instant men call years;  
Meantime hold hard by truth and his great soul,  
Do out the duty! Through such souls alone  
God stooping shows sufficient of his light  
For us i’ the dark to rise by. And I rise.”

It is evident that progress in such a world is no mere matter of mechanical reactions, the by-product of economic forces, a function of climate and food supply. It is in its very nature a function of character, of spiritual development, born of the power of the human mind and soul to react upon its environment, to turn upon the conditions by which it is surrounded and under which it lives, to modify and improve them.

Rejoice we are allied  
To that which doth provide  
And not partake, effect and not receive!  
A spark disturbs our clod;  
Nearer we hold of God  
Who gives, than of his tribes that take, I must believe.  
—(“Rabbi Ben Ezra.”)

Even social progress depends on the developing and perfecting of the individual. It is one of the strange contradictions of human experience that those who prate most of progress and profess themselves most devoted to the welfare of mankind should in these days be so largely the devotees of the “philosophy of dirt,” of the mechanical interpretation of human life. In point of fact, a mechanical philosophy is in

## OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

itself the chief barrier to progress. If man is nothing but result, and nowhere cause, then it is folly to exhort him to effort. If he is the victim of circumstances, if his character is inevitably determined by the quality of his food, the cubic air space in his sleeping chamber, then education is a waste of time, and the attempt to further political justice by extending democracy is the height of absurdity. The well-fed and well-housed are by hypothesis the only ones who can be regarded as good or intelligent, and it is for them, in the exercise of the impulses which the working of mechanical necessity creates in them, to lord it over the rest of mankind in such manner as seemeth them good.

But our practice, as always, is infinitely superior to our theories, and we go on striving for political and social progress, resolute, in spite of our philosophy, in the conviction of the perfectibility of human nature and the supremacy of character over circumstances. High thinking still has power to lend spice to plain living, and the love of justice wars against man's inhumanity to man until the world shall find its highest social order in "righteousness and peace and joy in holiness of spirit." Such a world must of necessity be filled with sorrow and disappointment, with pain and wrong, so long as the end remains unattained. But these things not only challenge the will to struggle onward toward that divine event, but afford the discipline and



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

training whereby men shall become worthy and able to achieve that high destiny.

It is evident, however, that such faith in human progress, resting, as it does, on the hope of individual no less than of social perfection, requires for its fulfillment Browning's further faith in an ultimate future for the individual beyond the limits of earthly experience. Certainly, few of our ideals are attained here. If life is a probation—and this is the real meaning of progress, though theology has generally emphasized the peril of failure, whereas the poet has laid chief stress on the hope of success—if we are placed between good and evil, "Life's business being just the terrible choice," then there must of necessity be some future sphere where the award shall be made, and "every winter turn to spring." It remains, therefore, to consider the poet's faith in immortality, which all his readers have recognized as the keystone in his arch of truth.

## CHAPTER VIII

### PROSPICE

MY friend the Professor of Psychology—the saints be good to him, for he is altogether one of the rarest souls that ever trod this planet, a modest and gentle spirit, a patient and pains-taking scholar in fields where I am but a dabbler—listens in tolerant amazement to the passion with which I discuss the problem of immortality. For his own part he professes the most languid interest in the matter. Life is good. He has worked, and loved, and gathered a friend or two, and if death should make an end of all, still he feels that it has been worth while.

Of quite another kidney is a youthful literary dilettante of my acquaintance—he who confided to me one day the distress occasioned in his artistic soul by the crudeness of nature: to wit, that while in the autumn she does succeed in blending the most violent contrasts of color into a not-unpleasing harmony, in the spring *the greens clash!* In a book of Paris sketches published some years ago my young friend tells a pathetic tale of a little lad, the son of the *concierge*, who died after a brief illness; when my friend felt constrained through pitying sympathy to offer the bereaved father the consola-

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

tions of a heaven in which his own enlightened mind had long ceased to believe.

Somewhere between these two points of view—the frankly empirical, content to take life as it is, and leave the question of its outcome for the future to take care of in its own way; and the sentimental, feebly clinging to the pleasant feelings stirred in the disillusioned heart by its outgrown faiths—the mind of the age seems to oscillate.

Individual reactions, naturally, vary widely. Professor Münsterberg felt that unending existence would be an unmitigated bore. Maeterlinck weaves beautiful spells of vague mysteries, wooing us from the love of life and the desire for individual persistence to a misty grandiose dream of some higher spiritual identity. The British novelists, each after his kind, seek to lose themselves in the study of the endless complex variety of human life here and now, asking no questions as to its larger meaning and outcome. Scores of busy men and women on every hand have, like my friend the Professor, so filled their lives with useful labor and their consciousness with the sense of social solidarity that the individual problem loses its poignancy, and they profess themselves content with

that choir invisible  
Of those immortal dead who live again  
In lives made better by their presence,

—a point of view characterized by Tennyson as  
“Faith as vague as all unsweet.”

## PROSPICE

But for all this surface content with the things that are seen and temporal, no thoughtful observer of the times can fail to feel, despite this apparent absorption in the life that now is, a restless impatience with the limitations of human experience, and a deep-lying sense of the tragedy of a life as futile as frail. On the one hand the ever-growing materialism of our civilization, the refusal of the modern man to postpone the enjoyment of his desires, the mad rush of work and play in which he drowns the possibility of thought and reflection, bear witness to an unsatisfied yearning which refuses to be stilled. On the other hand we find the "tender-minded" even among empirical scientists manifesting a growing interest in "psychic research," in the attempt to find some material proof of spiritual existence.

The essential pessimism of current philosophy points in the same direction. These things all testify to the place which the immortal hope holds in our total view of things. Here and there an exceptionally strong and valiant soul may hold to the worth of life despite its uncertainty and the gloom of its everlasting Night; but the great majority of the voices which cry aloud to the present world are mainly conscious of nothing save that "there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave whither thou goest." No man can go among his fellows as a spiritual adviser, seeking to find

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

for them comfort in their sorrows and strength in their temptations, and not realize the pall which the modern doubt has drawn over the face of the sky.

Now and then the dull submission—too tamed and stolid to be called resignation—with which the modern man foots the treadmill of existence breaks out into open revolt. Even the exquisite loveliness of Omar's melodious melancholy, with which the modern world has felt so much sympathy, and which tends all the while to shade off into a grimly playful Epicureanism, occasionally flashes up into a momentary defiance of the Fate from which there is no appeal:

Into this Universe, and *Why* not knowing,  
Nor *Whence*, like Water willy-nilly flowing;  
And out of it, as Wind along the Waste,  
I know not *Whither*, willy-nilly blowing.

What, without asking, hither hurried *Whence*?  
And, without asking, *Whither* hurried hence!  
Oh, many a Cup of this forbidden Wine  
Must drown the memory of that insolence!

Oh Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make,  
And ev'n with Paradise devise the Snake:  
For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man  
Is blacken'd—Man's forgiveness give—and take!

The spirit of the twelfth-century Persian, handed down to our time through the kindred genius of Fitzgerald, finds a like expression in the mouth of the anthologist of an American country town. Edgar Lee Masters' "Scholfield

## PROSPICE

Huxley" seems to me to voice the inner revolt of our whole modern life against the blank curtain which our philosophy has dropped at the end of it all:

God! ask me not to record your wonders,  
I admit the stars and the suns  
And the countless worlds.  
But I have measured their distances  
And weighed them and discovered their substances.  
I have devised wings for the air,  
And keels for water,  
And horses of iron for the earth.  
I have lengthened the vision you gave me a million  
times;  
I have leaped over space with speech,  
And taken fire for light out of the air.  
I have built great cities and bored through the hills,  
And bridged majestic waters.  
I have written the Iliad and Hamlet;  
And I have explored your mysteries,  
And searched for you without ceasing,  
And found you again after losing you  
In hours of weariness.  
And I ask you:  
How would you like to create a sun,  
And the next day have the worms  
Slipping in and out between your fingers?

Not in many a day has any poem so stirred me. Here we have the whole tragedy of modernity—its sureness of itself, its consciousness of masteries manifold, its triumphs over the limitations of fate, its disillusionment, its dumb despair, its bitter revolt. This is the passion that stirs in my own heart, and which my placid friend, the Professor, finds it so hard to understand. He, God bless him, has lived a somewhat

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

sheltered life, surrounded with his books and his students; and absorbed in his intellectual pursuits, has had small contact with the passionate, desperate, heart-hungry world of eager youth and disillusioned mid-age and sad, empty-hearted eld that ebbs and flows in never-ceasing tide under the white lights of Broadway and surges through Ludgate Circus and laughs in the Bois de Boulogne and is heaped in rotting mounds of shredded flesh between the trenches of the titan armies in Flanders.

What is it all about? What does it mean—not for Humanity, not for Civilization, but for Tommy and Fritz and Adolph and Ivan, for Mary and Gretchen and Elise and Anna? What does it mean for the murdered babes of Belgium and the dying exiles of Armenia; for the mothers of Europe and the cash-girls of America? What does it mean for *folks*—for plain, everyday men and women who are born and live and suffer and sorrow and die, and the worms slip in and out between their fingers?

Don't talk to me of the Race; of the contribution of the Individual to the progress of the Whole! Men don't live as a Race, as a Whole, as Civilization. They live as individuals. There is no human experience except individual experience. Every joy is some *one's* joy, every sorrow breaks some *one* heart. Granted that all these myriads of human individuals are, like the States of the American Union, constituted in mutual

## PROSPICE

dependence on each other, nevertheless humanity has no existence except in its individual units. Either life must have a meaning for the single human soul in the infinite isolation of its individuality, cut off as remotely from all its neighbors as the stars in their courses or the ions in their orbits within the atoms—else it has no meaning for the race, whatever it may have for some hypothetical God who watches over the whole farcical tragedy.

And he, shall he,  
Man, her last work, who seemed so fair,  
Such splendid purpose in his eyes,  
Who rolled the psalm to wintry skies,  
Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,  
Who trusted God was love indeed  
And love Creation's final law—  
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw  
With ravine, shrieked against his creed—  
Who loved, who suffered countless ills,  
Who battled for the True, the Just,  
Be blown about the desert dust,  
Or sealed within the iron hills?  
No more? A monster, then, a dream,  
A discord. Dragons of the prime,  
That tare each other in their slime,  
Were mellow music matched with him.  
O life as futile, then, as frail!  
—(*Tennyson, "In Memoriam."*)

It is the fashion just now to call this an egoistic, not to say selfish, point of view. The individual is bidden to sink this self-centered longing for personal fulfillment, in devotion to



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

the welfare of his fellows, and in hope for some future blessing in store for his remote descendants, to which glorious divine event his own life shall have been some small contribution.

Nonsense! If the future holds no meaning for the individual of to-day, it will hold no more for the individual of a thousand ages hence. When some modern Realist shall bring me, not apples and pears, but *fruit-in-general*, I will believe in some blessedness for *Man* which does not come to consciousness and have its abiding worth in *men*.

Selfish? Yes, as selfish as a mother's joy in her babe, as the bridegroom's joy in his bride. Selfish as the wish to live to-morrow that I may finish this book. Selfish as to comply with the laws of health, to call a doctor when I am sick, to look forward with joy to the possibilities of the new year, and hope to meet at home the friends I parted with in Paris last week.

All this talk with which we are regaled by the moderns is but whistling to keep their courage up. There are those who, like the Professor, fancy they have no interest in the question—though I have never been quite convinced that their hearts are so different from my own. But the loud-voiced assertion of the superior spiritual worth of the attitude which no longer desires a future existence has a hollow sound. Mr. Masters comes nearer being entirely ingenuous and frank: *God! How would you like it?*

Through the sickly atmosphere of our modern

## PROSPICE

life the "great interrupting" voice of Browning sounds its robust, cheerful courage, like the voice of his own Herakles before the palace of Admetus:

Even so,  
Sudden into the midst of sorrow, leapt  
Along with the gay cheer of that great voice,  
Hope, joy, salvation.—("Balaustion's Adventure.")

Amid the restless doubt and blind despair of the time his joyous confidence refreshes the soul like a healing draught from springs in the desert. Tennyson may "faintly trust the larger hope." Arnold may listen sadly to the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of the sea of faith,

Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.  
—"Dover Beach.")

The scientific world may announce the death of all spiritual existence and men may sink in the gloom of despair, but Browning heeds not.

God's in his heaven—  
All's right with the world.

He who created the demand must of necessity also create the supply, else his name is not God.

What, my soul? see thus far and no farther? When  
doors great and small  
Nine and ninety flew ope at a touch, shall the hundredth appall?  
In the least things have faith, yet distrust in the greatest of all?  
—"Saul.")

Browning does not attempt to *prove* immortality. Others may trifle with the fooleries of

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

Sludge if they will—the poet's faith rests on no such precarious foundation. He cheerfully admits that it is only a working hypothesis. But its immense superiority over all other interpretations of life is that it is a *working* hypothesis—and none other will work. Saint Paul declared it, and Omar and Masters reecho it. Why, then, stop halfway?

Was it not great? did he not throw on God,  
(He loves the burthen)—  
God's task to make the heavenly period  
Perfect the earthen?  
Did not he magnify the mind, show clear  
Just what it all meant?  
He would not discount life, as fools do here,  
Paid by installment.  
He ventured neck or nothing—heaven's success  
Found, or earth's failure:  
"Wilt thou trust death or not?" He answered "Yes!  
Hence with life's pale lure!"  
—("A Grammarian's Funeral.")

The poet lives in no fool's-paradise of closet speculation. He has fought with doubt no less than his contemporaries, but he drags it captive at his chariot wheels. All evil is to him an obstacle to the heights, an enemy to be overcome; and doubt, and death itself, belong with the rest of the brood of hell. So he sings for "one fight more, the best and the last," and bids his friends ask no better thing for him at the end than that he may

at noonday, in the bustle of man's work-time,  
Greet the Unseen with a cheer!  
Bid him forward, breast and back as either should be,  
"Strive and thrive!" cry, "Speed,—Fight on, fare ever  
There as here!"

## PROSPICE

Confronted with the question, Why was not the reality of the future life made plain to us? he answers, in "La Saisiaz," that such unmistakable revelation would destroy spiritual freedom—an argument we have met before in "A Death in the Desert." Even in this poem, called forth by the sudden death of a dear friend, and the only one in which he argues the question of immortality, he does not attempt to prove the life beyond—he only asserts that without it life, to him, is meaningless:

Nay, were fancy fact, were earth and all it holds illusion mere,  
Only a machine for teaching love and hate and hope and fear  
To myself, the sole existence, single truth 'mid falsehood—well!

. . . . .  
Still—with no more Nature, no more Man as riddle to be read,  
Only my own joys and sorrows now to reckon real instead—  
I must say—or choke in silence—"Howsoever came my fate,  
Sorrow did and joy did nowise—life well weighed—preponderate."

The mood is that of one who has found life more prodigal of promises than of satisfactions. The revolt of modern life represents the sense of the futility of human achievement confronted by the brevity of life and the certainty of death. It is the protest of the man to whom life has brought all good gifts. There is another and

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

perhaps more poignant protest in the heart of the man to whom life has brought nothing but the hunger for joy without its fulfillment.

There may be those to whom life has been such a tragedy that death seems a welcome release. As a matter of fact, however, this is a mood of despair, born of the collapse of faith in a future opportunity. The only thing that could really meet the need of such a heart would be some new state of existence in which the deep desires which are inborn in human nature might be met.

There are very many eager and capacious souls to whom life has denied her chiefest treasures. She has kept her promises to the ear, to break them to the hope. One by one the ideals and aspirations, the loves and friendships and achievements and successes with which she lures us to pour out the deepest life within us prove as we attain them to be but apples of Sodom, which turn to ashes in our grasp. How shall such souls be satisfied to pass out of existence into nothingness, having tasted nought that filled their hearts, or having found, along with much deep joy, such abysses of sorrow as left them broken and stricken by the wayside? Nothing can answer such need except a "new life altogether," and it is this which Browning sings.

### III

There are three classical expressions of the poet's attitude toward the whole problem—

## PROSPICE

"Cleon," "A Grammarian's Funeral," and "Abt Vogler," though the spirit which rises to its height in these poems runs like a golden thread throughout the whole body of his work.

The first expresses the same sense of the futility of human achievement, the same attitude toward life and death as we have found to be characteristic of the most sensitive spirits among the moderns.

The world of later Greek culture had much in common with the modern period. There was the same confidence in the discoveries of science and the triumphs of the intellect, the same disillusionment and ennui before the emptiness of life, the same agnosticism regarding the deeper realities of the spirit. The half-gods had gone, but the gods had not yet arrived. Pilate was a child of his time, with his half-weary, half-cynical, but wholly skeptical query, "What is truth?" In art as well as in literature and philosophy the period was one of decadence, in which form had taken the place of spirit, and was accompanied by a certain patronizing deference to the Golden Age gone by, much as Bernard Shaw in our own day patronizes Shakespeare.

Cleon the poet, writing to the tyrant Protus to express his appreciation of a certain munificent gift, answers at the same time two or three questions the king has propounded. To begin with, he modestly admits that he has attained the summit of human greatness, not in one field

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

of endeavor but in all. Poet, painter, sculptor, architect, philosopher—in all these directions achievement can no farther go. Since this is simple truth, and the gift of the gods, why allow a false modesty to deprecate the fact? In all this he feels that he has surpassed the greatest of the ancients, in that, though they may have surpassed him at the single point wherein each was supreme, he has touched all the heights of excellence.

This being granted, does it not follow, as Protus suggests, that Cleon must be accounted the happiest of mortals, since he cannot die, his spirit living on forever in these great works which bless the world? For answer the poet asks what step or stage in progress might have been suggested to the gods, when in the process of creation they had reached the point where mechanical and physical perfection was supreme. Would not the next step be the creation of self-consciousness, wherein perfection may bear witness to itself and find pleasure in its own contemplation? But, alas! the finite cannot be perfect, and self-consciousness, accordingly, becomes the supreme tragedy, since it means nothing more than the consciousness of limitation. The more plainly man sees the perfection of God, the more profound must be his despair at the pitiful weakness and failure of his own life.

Should not the artist prove an exception, however, since he at least shares the divine pre-

## PROSPICE

rogative of creation, and can image forth the perfection he cannot attain? The disillusioned poet assures his friend that this is to trip upon a merely verbal fallacy. The artist merely sees life more clearly than another—he does not *live*:

I can write love-odes: thy fair slave's an ode.  
I get to sing of love, when grown too gray  
For being beloved: she turns to that young man,  
The muscles all a-ripple on his back.  
I know the joy of kingship: well, thou art king!

But at least, the king may rejoin, the poem lives, and the poet lives in his song, while mere kings die.

Sappho survives, because we sing her songs,  
And Æschylus, because we read his plays.

Here we have precisely the quality of immortality commended to us by the moderns. Why should it not content the soul? I counsel those whose minds are befogged on this point to consider thoughtfully the passionate protest of the Greek poet. Again he declares that all this is to trip on a mere word. Do Æschylus and Sappho indeed live? Then

let them come and take  
Thy slave in my despite, drink from thy cup,  
Speak in my place.

The very essence of life is conscious experience. The keener, more intense the consciousness, the more abundant the life. Cleon does not make the point, but we readily see it: The sponge and the oyster may be said to live, but who would



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

compare the life of the oyster for value and significance with that of an alert and vigorous human spirit? If it be said that having lived intensely and keenly one should be content to pass out of existence, the only answer is, Then why should we have been so made that we desire to prolong this eager experience, and what is the use of having been made at all if it be but for a moment?

The heart of the tragedy, as Cleon declares, lies in this: that the keener and more intense the life, the more insatiable is the yearning for yet more and fuller life. This is the supreme agony of human existence, against which he protests with all his soul—though he can find no clear path out of the darkness.

"Say, rather, that my fate is deadlier still  
In this, that every day my sense of joy  
Grows more acute, my soul (intensified  
By power and insight) more enlarged, more keen;  
While every day my hairs fall more and more,  
My hand shakes, and the heavy years increase—  
The horror quickening still from year to year,  
The consummation coming past escape,  
When I shall know most, and yet least enjoy—  
When all my works wherein I prove my worth,  
Being present still to mock me in men's mouths,  
Alive still in the praise of such as thou,  
I, I the feeling, thinking, acting man,  
The man who loved his life so over-much,  
Sleep in my urn."

This is the very revolt of "Scholfield Huxley."  
It is the passion of Omar:

## PROSPICE

"When You and I behind the Veil are past,  
Oh, but the long, long while the World shall last."

"Ah Love! could you and I with Him conspire  
To grasp this sorry Scheme of things entire,  
Would not we shatter it to bits—and then  
Remold it nearer to the Heart's desire!"

The heart of Cleon refuses to rest in this conclusion, though he can find no standing ground for faith.

"It is so horrible,  
I dare at times imagine to my need  
Some future state revealed to us by Zeus,  
Unlimited in capability  
For joy, as this is in desire for joy,  
—To seek which the joy-hunger forces us:  
That, stung by straitness of our life, made strait  
On purpose to make prized that life at large—  
Freed by the throbbing impulse we call death,  
We burst there as the worm into the fly,  
Who, while a worm still, wants his wings. But no!  
Zeus has not yet revealed it; and alas,  
He must have done so were it possible!"

And then follows a passage in which Browning has at once caught the spirit of first-century Greek culture and the self-sufficiency of modern scientific thought. The King has heard of one called Paulus, who is said to have tidings of just such a revelation as the poet longs for. Cleon answers an inquiry:

"Thou canst not think a mere barbarian Jew,  
As Paulus proves to be, one circumcised,  
Hath access to a secret shut from us?  
Thou wrongest our philosophy, O King,  
In stooping to inquire of such an one,  
As if his answer could impose at all!

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

He writeth, doth he? Well, and he may write!  
Oh, the Jew findeth scholars! certain slaves  
Who touched on this same isle, preached him and  
Christ;  
And (as I gathered from a bystander)  
Their doctrine could be held by no sane man."

Not otherwise would Maeterlinck and Münsterberg, Hauptmann and Galsworthy, pass over the suggestion that the Christian faith might prove indeed a message from the Infinite!

### IV

"Cleon," as we have seen, represents the futility of human achievement in the face of the great fact of death. It is Browning's one chief assertion of the negative side, the tragedy of a life which holds no outlook beyond this present world. "A Grammarian's Funeral" comes at the matter from the opposite angle, and asserts the supreme worth of a life lived on a scale so vast that death becomes a negligible incident.

The poem is of interest from many points of view. It finds an inspiring idealism beneath a drudging devotion to the dry-as-dust trivialities of grammar. It interprets the inner side of humanism, the genuine enthusiasm for truth which was awakened by the Revival of Learning, and no less the enlarged scope which it gave to life itself. But the deepest thing in the poem is its recognition of the true proportions of the human soul, its character as belonging not to

## PROSPICE

time but to eternity. The modern man says, with Tom Moore on the cigar signs, "As we journey through life let us live by the way." He is so afraid that this life is the only opportunity he will have for joy, that he is unwilling to let the slightest pleasure escape. The days and years spent in drudgery, however valuable they may have been for the development of the soul, he counts wasted. Only yesterday an eager woman, a suffrage leader, told me how she regretted the ten years she spent rearing her children in a small town—not unhappy, but missing all the opportunities for travel and enjoyment that she might have had but for marriage and its responsibilities. She counted those years lost.

Over against this attitude toward life is set the spirit of a man who is so sure that life is worth living that he is willing first to learn how to live—

No end to learning:  
Earn the means first—God surely will contrive  
Use for our earning.  
Others mistrust and say, "But time escapes:  
Live now or never!"  
He said, "What's time? Leave Now for dogs and apes!  
Man has Forever!"

That low man seeks a little thing to do,  
Sees it and does it:  
This high man, with a great thing to pursue,  
Dies ere he knows it.  
That low man goes on adding one to one,  
His hundred's soon hit:  
This high man, aiming at a million,  
Misses an unit.

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

That, has the world here—should he need the next,  
Let the world mind him!  
This, throws himself on God, and unperplexed  
Seeking, shall find him.

Small wonder the disciples of such a man  
refuse to bury their master where darkling  
thorpe and croft sleep, "safe in their tether,"  
on the bosom of the "unlettered plain"; that  
they will rather seek sepulture

On a tall mountain, citied to the top,  
Crowded with culture!

Thither our path lies; wind we up the heights:  
Wait ye the warning?  
Our low life was the level's and the night's;  
He's for the morning.

Here's the top peak; the multitude below  
Live, for they can, there:  
This man decided not to Live but Know—  
Bury this man there?  
Here—here's his place, where meteors shoot, clouds form,  
Lightnings are loosened,  
Stars come and go! Let joy break with the storm,  
Peace let the dew send!  
Lofty designs close in like effects:  
Loftily lying,  
Leave him—still loftier than the world suspects,  
Living and dying.

## V

When we turn to "Abt Vogler," all question  
and doubt are swallowed up in the exuberant  
faith that every discord must be resolved, and  
the complete fulfillment of the soul's longings

## PROSPICE

assured. Music is, after all, the one creation  
*ex nihilo* in our experience:

But here is the finger of God, a flash of the will that can,  
Existent behind all laws, that made them, and lo, they  
are!

And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to  
man,  
That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound,  
but a star.

But music is essential optimism, for the ear  
is not satisfied until it shall end in perfect har-  
mony, no matter what dissonances may be en-  
countered on the way. Therefore the heart of  
the musician, thrilled to its depths by the power  
of the music he has poured forth out of his own  
soul, turns trustfully to Him who likewise is  
the builder and maker of houses not made with  
hands—confident that in him our good shall  
live forever and our evil be transformed to his  
perfect will.

There shall never be one lost good! What was, shall  
live as before;

The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound;  
What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much  
good more;

On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven a perfect  
round.

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall  
exist;

Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good,  
nor power

Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the  
melodist

When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too  
hard,  
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the  
sky,  
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard;  
Enough that he heard it once: we shall hear it by  
and by.

Even our weaknesses and sins and failures are  
but captives to be dragged at our chariot wheels  
to show how great were the enemies over whom  
we have triumphed:

And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence  
For the fullness of the days? Have we withered or  
agonized?  
Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing  
might issue thence?  
Why rushed the discords in, but that harmony should  
be prized?  
Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear,  
Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal and  
woe:  
But God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear;  
The rest may reason and welcome: 'tis we musicians  
know.

Surely, no sensitive soul can listen to the vast  
sorrow of Tschaikowsky's Pathetic Symphony, or  
the surging passion of the Tannhaeuser Overture,  
or the triumphant joy with which Beethoven  
closes the Fifth Symphony without recognizing  
what the poet meant, and feeling with him  
that Creation's chorus itself must end in its  
"Hallelujah, for the Lord God Omnipotent reign-  
eth!"

## PROSPICE

### VI

With these three chief expressions of Browning's faith we must place such outbursts of confident hope as may be found in "Rabbi Ben Ezra," "Evelyn Hope," and "Life in a Love." The great teacher of the Ghetto challenges those who bid us seize the passing moment lest joy escape:

Fool! All that is, at all,  
Lasts ever, past recall;  
Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure:  
What entered into thee,  
That was, is, and shall be:  
Time's wheel runs back or stops: Potter and clay endure.

In "Evelyn Hope" the busy man of middle age, sitting by the dead form of the lovely girl whose sweetness and innocence had meant so much to him, though she scarcely knew his name, feels that his love for her nevertheless has its own meaning and must have its own fruition:

"Delayed, it may be, for more lives yet,  
Through worlds I shall traverse, not a few;  
Much is to learn, much to forget,  
Ere the time be come for taking you.

"I have lived (I shall say) so much since then,  
Given up myself so many times,  
Gained me the gains of various men,  
Ransacked the ages, spoiled the climes;  
Yet one thing, one, in my soul's full scope,  
Either I missed or itself missed me:  
And I want and find you, Evelyn Hope!"

So in the two brief poems which embody perhaps the profoundest interpretation of human



## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

love to be found in any literature, "Love in a Life" and "Life in a Love," the poet recognizes the elusiveness of life's loftiest ideals so far as our human experience goes: "Still the same chance! she goes out as I enter." Yet it is worth while to spend the whole of our day in the quest; and though twilight falls

—with such suites to explore,  
Such closets to search, such alcoves to importune,  
the love and life we pursue can never in the end utterly escape us:

But what if I fail of my purpose here?  
It is but to keep the nerves at strain,  
To dry one's eyes and laugh at a fall,  
And baffled, get up and begin again,—  
So the chase takes up one's life, that's all.  
While, look but once from your farthest bound  
At me so deep in the dust and dark,  
No sooner the old hope goes to ground  
Than a new one, straight to the self-same mark  
I shape me—  
Ever  
Removed!

This is the spirit in which Robert Browning faced life. He "believed in the Soul, was very sure of God." He was confident that everything in life which baffles and perplexes is but a part of the discipline and training of spiritual manhood. Disappointment and sorrow, hardship and struggle, pain and loss, all are relative to the larger meaning and purpose of existence.

Such a human life as he conceives must of

## PROSPICE

necessity be of larger scope than this brief experience of the earthly years can afford. It is tuned to Eternity. This life must be probationary, the "initiatory spasm." Earth is but the vestibule of God's great temple, whose grandeur and excelling beauty the chiefest of earth's treasures can but suggest. To live as though the pleasure and joy of human experience were the supreme ends is to lose one's soul. To count not one's life dear unto oneself in the pursuit of those ideals which transcend time and place is to attain.

Death, in such a life, is a mere incident, the gateway into the larger experience. To question the soul's life after death is to deny the meaning of it all, to overthrow the foundations of a life-philosophy based on the worth of the ideal. Therefore Browning will give no place to doubt or fear. He casts himself boldly on the goodness of God and the veracity of human instincts, and lives in the length and breadth of the Infinite.

How all the petty trivialities of present-day thought are dwarfed by such an outlook on the universe! How deep and calm and broad is such a life compared with the hot and restless passion of the moderns, with their defiance of fate and their denunciations of the moral law. Mid-Victorian it may be, and orthodox, not to say Christian; but, at least, it gives room for the soul to live and stretch itself, to spread its wings and fly in the deep empyrean of a life great enough

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

to be worth while and full enough to satisfy the most insatiable hunger for fulfillment and self-expression.

With such a faith a man can afford to keep under his body and bring it into subjection to the higher ends of thought and feeling. He can be content with a small measure of what men call success and achievement, laying up for himself treasures where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt. He can be sick and poor and friendless and yet possess a wealth greater than the treasures of Ind, because he lives in the eternal universe as a son in his Father's house. He can love with all the strength of his soul, and see his loved ones laid in the ground, and look forward to the day when for him as well the worms will be slipping in and out between his fingers, and his heart will not break, because he looks for a city that hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

This, therefore, as it seems to me, is the deepest thing in the message of Browning. At least it is that which speaks most deeply to my own heart, and by reason of which I turn to him in hours of discouragement,

when my light is low,  
When the blood creeps, and the nerves prick  
And tingle; and the heart is sick,  
And all the wheels of Being slow.

Always I find him tonic and inspiring. I love the joy in life which he always feels, the fresh-

## PROSPICE

ness of his interest in common humanity, the vigor of his enthusiasm, the robust courage of his everyday philosophy. But most of all I find help in his unconquerable faith in life and its ultimate outcome, in the spirit that could sing its cheeriest song of hope through the midst of his sorrow for the Love which had been life's richest gift.

Fear death?—to feel the fog in my throat,  
The mist in my face,  
When the snows begin, and the blasts denote  
I am nearing the place,  
The power of the night, the press of the storm,  
The post of the foe;  
Where he stands, the Arch Fear in a visible form,  
Yet the strong man must go:  
For the journey is done and the summit attained,  
And the barriers fall,  
Though a battle's to fight ere the guerdon be gained,  
The reward of it all.  
I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,  
The best and the last!  
I would hate that death bandaged my eyes, and  
forebore,  
And bade me creep past.  
No! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers  
The heroes of old,  
Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life's arrears  
Of pain, darkness, and cold.  
For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,  
The black minute's at end,  
And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,  
Shall dwindle, shall blend,  
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,  
Then a light, then thy breast,  
O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,  
And with God be the rest!

## CONFESSIONS OF A BROWNING LOVER

And his last word to the world is the ringing  
challenge of the "Epilogue" to "Asolando":

At the midnight in the silence of the sleep-time,  
When you set your fancies free,  
Will they pass to where—by death, fools think, im-  
prisoned,  
Low he lies who once so loved you, whom you loved so,  
—Pity me?

Oh to love so, be so loved, yet so mistaken!  
What had I on earth to do  
With the slothful, with the mawkish, the unmanly?  
Like the aimless, helpless, hopeless, did I drive!  
—Being—who?

One who never turned his back but marched breast  
forward,  
Never doubted clouds would break,  
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong  
would triumph,  
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,  
Sleep to wake.

No, at noonday in the bustle of man's work-time  
Greet the Unseen with a cheer!  
Bid him forward, breast and back as either should be,  
"Strive and thrive!" cry "Speed,—fight on, fare ever  
There as here!"

## INDEX

### A

- Abraham, 32.  
 "Abt Vogler," 40, 48, 61, 65,  
 176, 200, 225, 232ff.  
 Andrea del Sarto, 40, 61, 87.  
 "Andrea del Sarto," 41, 81.  
 "Angelus, The," 70ff.  
 Anthropomorphism, 144 ff.,  
 157ff.  
 "Apparent Failure," 99.  
 Aristotle, 92.  
 Arnold, Matthew, 27, 40, 60,  
 139, 168, 221.  
 Art and Artists, 24ff., 29, 31ff.,  
 49ff., 87ff.  
 "Asolando, Epilogue to," 193,  
 222, 240.  
 "At the Mermaid," 86.  
 Augustine, Saint, 54, 58, 158.  
 "Aurora Leigh" (Mrs. Brown-  
 ing), 73, 113.

### B

- Bach, 47.  
 "Balaustion," 21, 155, 179,  
 221.  
 Beauty, 28, 34, 42ff., 55ff.  
 Beecher, 192.  
 Beethoven, 34, 47, 53, 234.  
 Bennett, Arnold, 84, 98.  
 Benson, A. C., 80.  
 Bergson, 109ff., 187.  
 "Bishop Blougram's Apology,"  
 31, 38, 65, 81, 125, 130,  
 188-9, 198, 199.

- "Bishop Orders His Tomb,  
 The," 38, 67.  
 "Blot in the 'Scutcheon, The,'"  
 21, 23.  
 "Blue Bird, The," 112.  
 Booth, Edwin, 71.  
 Botticelli, 29, 62, 87.  
 Bridge-building, 132ff.  
 British Novelists, 83, 214.  
 Browning, Elizabeth Barrett,  
 72, 73, 77, 78, 113, 121, 179.  
 Browning, Robert—as Artist,  
 19ff., 24ff., 39ff., 46ff., 66,  
 135, 192; as Philosopher, 16,  
 19, 21, 26, 28, 29, 73, 87ff.,  
 144ff., 164; as Religious  
 Teacher, 18ff., 103ff., 135ff.;  
 Health, 192; Human Inter-  
 est, 36, 63ff.; Message, 15,  
 50; Obscurity, 17, 77ff.;  
 Optimism, 68, 97, 192ff.;  
 Orthodoxy, 97, 102; Range  
 of Interest, 10; Revolt, 96,  
 101ff.  
 Browning, Robert, Poems  
 Quoted:  
 Abt Vogler, 200, 233, 234.  
 Andrea del Sarto, 41.  
 Apparent Failure, 99.  
 Asolando, Epilogue to, 193,  
 222, 240.  
 At the Mermaid, 86.  
 Balaustion's Adventure, 155,  
 221.

## INDEX

- Bishop Blougram's Apology,  
     38, 67, 125, 130, 189, 198,  
     199.  
 Caliban Upon Setebos, 145.  
 Childe Roland, 194.  
 Christmas Eve and Easter  
     Day, 167-168, 169.  
 Cleon, 227, 228, 229, 230.  
 Cristina, 174.  
 Death in the Desert, A, 127,  
     153, 169, 197, 204, 205,  
     209.  
 Dramatis Personæ, Epilogue  
     to, 142, 143.  
 Epistle of Karshish, 152.  
 Evelyn Hope, 235.  
 Ferishtah's Fancies, 67.  
 Fra Lippo Lippi, 21, 24, 33,  
     44, 188.  
 Grammarian's Funeral, A,  
     222, 231, 232.  
 Holy Cross Day, 47.  
 In a Balcony, 169.  
 Instans Tyrannus, 195.  
 La Saisiaz, 223.  
 Love in a Life, Life in a  
     Love, 236.  
 Old Pictures in Florence,  
     205-207.  
 One Word More, 59, 67, 81,  
     177.  
 Paracelsus, 14, 138, 166,  
     173, 204.  
 Pippa Passes, 138, 221.  
 Popularity, 47.  
 Prospice, 239.  
 Rabbi Ben Ezra, 47, 165,  
     182, 183-184, 198, 205,  
     207, 208, 209, 210, 235.  
 Ring and The Book, The:  
     Introduction, 28, 117.  
     Caponsacchi, 153.  
     Pompilia, 153, 210.  
     The Pope, 67, 119, 140,  
         141, 143, 153, 198-199,  
         209.  
     Guido, 68.  
     The Book and the Ring,  
         81, 119.  
 Saul, 18, 45, 147, 148, 149,  
     199, 207, 221.  
 Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis,  
     23, 24.  
 Statue and the Bust, The,  
     130.  
 Browning, Robert, Poems Dis-  
     cussed:  
     Abt Vogler, 232ff.  
     Balaustion, 179.  
     Bishop Orders His Tomb,  
         The, 67.  
     Christmas Eve and Easter  
         Day, 129ff.  
     Cleon, 225ff.  
     Death in the Desert, A,  
         126f., 177.  
     Epistle of Karshish, 151f.  
     Grammarian's Funeral, A,  
         230ff.  
     In a Balcony, 177.  
     In a Laboratory, 39.  
     Paracelsus, 121f.  
     Rabbi Ben Ezra, 207.  
     Ring and The Book, The, 82,  
         117ff., 178.  
     Saul, 147.  
     Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis,  
         22ff.

## INDEX

- Statue and the Bust, The, 130.
- Browning Robert, Poems Referred to:  
 Abt Vogler, 40, 48, 65, 176.  
 Andrea del Sarto, 40, 81.  
 Any Wife to Any Husband, 171.  
 Balaustion, 21.  
 Bishop Blougram's Apology, 31, 38, 65, 81, 137.  
 Bishop Orders His Tomb, The, 38.  
 Blot in the 'Scutcheon, The, 28.  
 By the Fireside, 176.  
 Caliban upon Setebos, 31, 46, 65, 157.  
 Childe Roland, 88.  
 Cleon, 15, 31, 48, 65, 81, 176.  
 Confessional, The, 171.  
 Count Gismond, 65.  
 Cristina, 176.  
 Death in the Desert, A, 65, 123, 137, 141, 147, 176, 223.  
 Epistle of Karshish, 40, 65, 176.  
 Evelyn Hope, 176.  
 Face, A, 38.  
 Fifine at the Fair, 65, 171.  
 Forgiveness, A, 46.  
 Fra Lippo Lippi, 38.  
 Garden Fancies, 22.  
 Gold Hair, 65.  
 Holy Cross Day, 46.  
 How They Brought the Good News, 18.  
 In a Laboratory, 38.
- Incident of the French Camp, 18.  
 Ivan Ivanovitch, 65.  
 James Lee's Wife, 171.  
 Johannes Agricola, 65.  
 La Saisiaz, 137.  
 Last Ride Together, 39, 176.  
 Lost Leader, The, 35, 180.  
 Love Among the Ruins, 38, 44, 176.  
 Master Hugues, 46.  
 Memorabilia, 44.  
 Men and Women, 38.  
 Mr. Sludge the Medium, 46, 65, 222.  
 My Last Duchess, 38, 67.  
 My Star, 44.  
 Ned Bratts, 65.  
 One Word More, 44, 77, 176.  
 Paracelsus, 28, 38, 44.  
 Pied Piper, The, 18.  
 Pippa Passes, 171.  
 Porphyria's Lover, 65.  
 Rabbi Ben Ezra, 28, 65, 176.  
 Ring and The Book, The, 21, 31, 38, 40, 65, 79, 128, 137, 167, 171, 176.  
 Rudel, 176.  
 Saul, 18, 44, 48.  
 Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister, 46.  
 Sordello, 17, 35, 38, 44, 79.  
 Two Poets of Croisic, 28.
- Bunyan, 108.  
 Burns, 35, 41.  
 Burroughs, John, 94.  
 Byron, 30, 101ff.  
 "By the Fireside," 176.



## INDEX

### C

Caliban, 31, 46, 65, 145, 157.  
 Carlo Dolci, 40.  
 Carlyle, 36, 139, 168.  
 Cave Man, 57.  
 Chambers, Robert W., 86.  
 "Chapman's Homer" (Keats), 18.  
 Chesterton, 22, 47, 51, 97, 100, 118, 125, 131.  
 "Childe Roland," 88, 194.  
 Chinese Proverb, 60.  
 "Choir Invisible" (George Eliot), 214.  
 Christ, Person of, 152ff.  
 "Christmas Eve and Easter Day," 129f., 167-168, 169.  
 Cimabue, 40, 62.  
 "Cleon," 15, 31, 48, 65, 81, 176, 225ff.  
 Clifford, Professor, 85.  
 "Cloud, The" (Shelley), 42.  
 Clough, Arthur Hugh, 168.  
 Coleridge, 43.  
 Comte, 137.  
 Corson, Professor, 65.  
 "Count Gismond," 65.  
 "Cristina," 174, 176.  
 Cromwell, 54.  
 Cubist, 34.

### D

"Daffodils" (Wordsworth), 35.  
 Dante, 26, 37, 42, 108, 177.  
 "Dark Flower, The," 90, 174.  
 Darwin, 12, 93ff., 101, 165, 166.  
 Dead Dog, A, 66.  
 "Death in the Desert, A," 65, 126, 137, 141, 153, 169, 176, 177, 197, 204, 205, 223

Debussy, 47.

Dickens, 85.

"Dover Beach" (Arnold), 221.

"Dramatis Personæ, Epilogue to," 132f.

### E

Edinburgh Review, 23.  
 Eliot, George, 108, 214.  
 Ellis, Havelock, 97.  
 Emerson, 60, 107.  
 "Epistle of Karshish," 40, 65, 151f., 176.  
 "Evelyn Hope," 176, 235.  
 Evil, Problem of, 185ff.

### F

"Face, A," 38.  
 Faith, 123ff.  
 "Faust" (Goethe), 118, 120.  
 "Ferishtah's Fancies," 67.  
 "Fifine at the Fair," 65, 171.  
 Fifth Symphony (Beethoven), 34, 234.  
 Fiske, John, 201.  
 Fitzgerald, 216, 229.  
 "Forgiveness, A," 46.  
 Fra Angelico, 29.  
 "Fra Lippo Lippi," 21, 24, 33, 38, 44, 61, 188.  
 France, Anatole, 83, 91.  
 Freedom, 163, 169.  
 Futurist, 32, 39.

### G

Galileo, 92.  
 Galsworthy, 90, 98, 174, 230.  
 "Garden Fancies," 22.  
 Gladstone, 90.  
 God, Idea of, 136.

## INDEX

Goethe, 26, 37, 120.

"Gold Hair," 65.

Gorky, 83.

"Grammarians' Funeral, A," 230ff.

"Grecian Urn, Ode to" (Keats), 44.

### H

Haeckel, 95, 124, 143, 161f.

Hamlet, 32, 71.

Hauptmann, 84, 230.

Hazlitt, 107.

"Holy Cross Day," 46, 47.

Homer, 31, 47.

"How They Brought the Good News," 18.

Human Nature, 165ff.

Hume, 202.

Huxley, 13.

Hymnology, 25.

### I

Ian McLaren, 151.

Ibsen, 91.

"Idylls of the King" (Tennyson), 36.

Iliad, 31.

"In a Balcony," 169, 177.

"In a Laboratory," 38, 39.

"Incident of the French Camp," 18.

Incarnation, 64, 148ff.

Individualism, 180ff.

"In Memoriam" (Tennyson), 72, 115, 146, 219, 238.

"Instans Tyrannus," 195.

"Intimations of Immortality" (Wordsworth), 27, 59.

"Ivan Ivanovitch," 65.

### J

Jackson, Stonewall, 132.

James, Professor, 132.

"Jean Christophe" (Roland), 83.

"Johannes Agricola," 65.

### K

Kant, 92, 110.

Keats, 18, 30, 43, 44, 49, 80.

Kempis, Thomas à, 108, 124.

Kingsley, Charles, 36, 179.

Kipling, 43, 48, 84, 183.

"Kubla Khan" (Coleridge), 43.

### L

"La Saisiaz," 137, 223.

"Last Ride Together," 39, 176.

Le Gallienne, Richard, 76, 83.

Leonardo, 87, 135.

Literature, Modern, 11, 13, 82f.

Locke, 202.

"Locksley Hall" (Tennyson), 36.

Lord, John, 144.

"Lost Leader, The," 35, 180.

Love, 169ff.

"Love Among the Ruins," 44, 176.

"Love in a Life, Life in a Love," 40, 176, 177, 236.

### M

Macaulay, 168.

Maeterlinck, 84, 90, 112, 219, 230.

Mark Twain, 85.

Masefield, John, 13.

"Master Hugues," 46.

## INDEX

Masters, Edgar Lee, 217, 220,  
222, 228.  
"Maud" (Tennyson), 36.  
Maurice, F. D., 179.  
Memmling, 87.  
"Memorabilia," 44.  
Meredith, George, 85.  
Michaelangelo, 41, 46, 48, 63,  
87, 135.  
"Midsummer Night's Dream"  
(Shakespeare), 42.  
Mid-Victorian Spirit, 90, 97, 98,  
101, 105, 121, 131, 139, 237.  
Mill, J. S., 146, 185, 202.  
Millet, 62, 70ff.  
Milton, 30, 42.  
"Mr. Sludge the Medium," 46,  
65, 222.  
Modernism, 11, 86ff., 89ff.,  
105ff., 166, 173, 215, 231.  
More, Paul Elmer, 23, 29, 30,  
170f., 194.  
Morris, William, 36, 61, 179.  
Münsterberg, 214, 230.  
"My Last Duchess," 38, 39.  
"My Star," 44.

### N

"Ned Bratts," 65.  
Nero, 51.  
Nettleship, 65.  
New Birth, 170ff.  
Newton, 92.  
Nietzsche, 83, 90, 91, 122, 185.  
"Nightingale, Ode to" (Keats),  
43.  
Nominalist, 33, 220.  
"Northern Farmer" (Tenny-  
son), 36.  
Noyes, Alfred, 13, 94.

### O

"Old Pictures in Florence,"  
199, 205ff.  
Omar Khayyam, 216, 222, 229.  
"One Word More," 44, 59, 176,  
177.  
Orbit of Life, 157ff.  
Orr, Mrs., 65, 97, 102.

### P

Paley, 93.  
"Paracelsus," 14, 38, 44, 121f.,  
138, 166, 178, 204.  
"Paradise Lost" (Milton), 30.  
"Pied Piper, The," 18.  
"Pippa Passes," 133, 171, 221.  
Plato, 50, 53, 55, 58, 61, 92.  
Poe, 41.  
"Poet's Vision of Man"  
(Powell), 202.  
"Popularity," 47.  
"Porphyria's Lover," 65.  
Pragmatism, 111ff., 154.  
"Prometheus, Unbound"  
(Shelley), 31.  
Progress, 204ff.  
"Prospice," 239.  
Psychology, 29, 163, 171, 202f.  
Psychology, Professor of, 213,  
214, 217, 220.  
Puritanism, 54, 58, 64, 158f.,  
168.

### Q

Quotations from Other Poets:  
Arnold, Matthew, "Dover  
Beach," 221.  
Browning, E. B.,  
"Aurora Leigh," 73, 113.  
"Wine of Cyprus," 179.

## INDEX

- Coleridge, "Kubla Khan," 43.  
 Eliot, George, "Choir Invisible," 214.  
 Fitzgerald, "Omar Khayyam," 216, 229.  
 Keats, "Chapman's Homer," 18; "Grecian Urn," 44; "Nightingale," 43.  
 Masters, Edgar Lee, "Scholfeld Huxley," 217.  
 Shelley, "Cloud," 42.  
 Tennyson, "In Memoriam," 72, 115, 146, 219, 238.  
 Wordsworth, "Immortality," 59, 63; "Tables Turned," 74; "Daffodils," 35; "Tintern Abbey," 35.
- R
- "Rabbi Ben Ezra," 38, 47, 65, 165, 176, 182, 183-184, 198, 235.  
 Raphael, 34, 40, 41, 45, 48, 50, 62.  
 Rembrandt, 62, 87.  
 Riley, James Whitcomb, 41.  
 "Ring and The Book, The," 21, 23, 31, 38, 40, 65, 67, 68, 79, 117, 119, 128, 137, 138, 140, 141, 148, 153, 155, 167, 176, 178, 198-199.  
 Rodin, 48.  
 Rolland, Romaine, 83.  
 Rubens, 41.  
 "Rudel," 176.  
 Ruskin, 36, 61, 139, 168, 179.
- S
- Saintsbury, Professor, 21.  
 Sappho, 31.  
 "Saul," 18, 44, 45, 48, 147, 148, 149, 199, 221.  
 Schoenberg, 47.  
 "Scholfeld Huxley" (Masters), 217, 228.  
 Science, Modern, 11ff., 82, 91ff., 161ff., 190-191.  
 Scott, 85.  
 Shakespeare, 22, 26, 32, 37, 42, 47, 49, 50, 71, 80.  
 Shaw, G. Bernard, 52, 97, 183, 225.  
 Shelley, 31, 51, 97, 102, 106.  
 "Sherwood" (Noyes), 84.  
 "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis," 22, 23, 24.  
 "Skylark" (Shelley), 31.  
 Social Problems, 36, 179ff.  
 "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," 46, 67.  
 "Sordello," 17, 35, 38, 44, 79, 225.  
 Spencer, Herbert, 94, 95, 110, 124, 165, 202.  
 "Statue and the Bust, The," 130.  
 Stevenson, 194.  
 Strauss, Richard, 47.  
 Sudermann, 83.  
 Swinburne, 171.
- T
- "Tables Turned" (Wordsworth), 74.  
 "Tannhäuser" Overture, 234.  
 Tennyson, 16, 29, 35, 46, 47, 72, 79, 80, 84, 115, 139, 146, 168, 175, 214, 219, 221, 238.  
 Thackeray, 85.

## INDEX

"Tintern Abbey" (Wordsworth), 35.

Tolstoy, 50, 54, 58, 61.

Trent, Professor, 43.

Tschaikowsky, 234.

Turner, 104.

"Two Poets of Croisic," 28.

Tyndall, 13.

### U

Unitarianism, 150, 153.

### V

Voltaire, 137.

Von Moltke, 76.

### W

War in Europe, 13, 89, 181, 218.

Wells, H. G., 97, 183.

Wharton, Edith, 98.

Whistler, 135.

White, Bouck, 182.

Wilde, Oscar, 53, 171.

"Wine of Cyprus" (Mrs. Browning), 179.

Wordsworth, 26f., 35, 46, 47, 59, 61, 62, 106, 180.





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